

George Manville Fenn

"Through Forest and Stream"

Chapter One.

Why we were there.

The captain of the steamer stopped by where I was watching the flying fish fizz out of the blue-ink-like water, skim along for some distance, and drop in again, often, I believe, to be snapped up by some bigger fish; and he gave me a poke in the shoulder with one finger, so hard, that it hurt.

"Yes?" I said, for he stood looking hard in my face, while I looked back harder in his, for it seemed such a peculiar way of addressing one, and his manner was more curious still.

He was naturally a smooth-faced man with a very brownish-yellow skin, and he kept on passing the finger with which he had poked me over first one cheek and then over the other, just as if he were shaving himself without soap.

Then his speech seemed more peculiar than his manner, for he repeated my one word, only instead of pronouncing it *yes*, he turned it into *yuss*.

He looked so comic and puzzled that I smiled, and the smile became a laugh.

I was sorry directly after, because it seemed rude to one who had been very civil to me ever since we left Kingston Harbour.

"Tain't nothing to laugh at, young feller," he said, frowning. "I've been talking to him yonder, and I can't make nothing of him. He's a *re-lay-tive* of yours, isn't he?"

"Yes; my uncle," I replied.

"Well, I'm afraid he don't know what he's cut out for himself, and I think I ought to tell you, so as you may talk to him and bring him to his senses."

"There's no need," I said, quickly.

"Oh, yes, there is, my lad. He don't know what he's got before him, and it's right that you should. He's going shooting, isn't he?"

"Yes."

"Nattralist?"

"Yes."

"Well, he don't know what the parts are like where he's going. Do you know what fevers is?"

"Oh, yes," I replied; "I've heard of them often."

"Well, the coast yonder's where they're made, my lad. Natur's got a big workshop all along there, and she makes yaller ones, and black ones; scarlet, too, I dessay, though I never see none there that colour."

"Uncle's a doctor," I said, "and he'll know all about that."

"But he's going, he tells me, to shoot birds in the forests and up the rivers, and means to skin 'em, and he won't do it."

"Why not?" I said.

"Why not? Because if the fevers don't stop you both, the Injuns will; and if they don't, you'll get your boat capsized in the rivers or along the coast, or you'll get lost in the woods and never be heard of again."

"Uncle's an old, experienced traveller," I said, "and has been a great deal in South America."

"You warn't with him there, was you?"

"No," I said; "but I was with him in the East Indian Islands."

"Then you tell him to stop about the West Indy Islands. He may get some birds there, but he won't if he goes to the coast yonder. You tell him I say so."

"What's the use?" I said. "Uncle has made his plans."

"Oh, yes, and he thinks he's going to do wonders with that cranky cockboat."

He turned and nodded his head contemptuously at our good-sized boat lashed on the deck amidships.

"It was the best he could get in Port Royal Harbour," I said, "and all the better for being rather small."

"Why?" said the captain.

"Easier to manage. We can go up the rivers in her, or sail along the coast."

"You'll get snagged in the rivers, and pitched into the sea if you try to coast along. Oh, here he is!"

For at that moment Uncle Dick, looking particularly eager and inquiring, came up to where we stood.

"Well, captain," he said, "having a word with my nephew about our boat?"

"That's so, sir," was the reply, "and about that venture of yours. You take my advice, now, and just go from port to port with me, and you can buy all you want for a few dollars; and that'll be better than going up country and catching fevers. There's lots o' bird-skins to be bought."

Uncle Dick laughed good-humouredly.

"Why, captain," he said, "I might just as well have stopped in London and bought a few bird-skins down by the docks."

"A deal better, doctor. You don't know what you're cutting out for yourself."

"We should come off badly for natural history specimens, captain, if people followed your advice."

"Quite well enough, doctor. I don't see much good in stuffed birds."

"Ah, well, captain," said my uncle, "we will not argue about that. You land us and our boat where I said."

"Do you know what sort of a place it is, sir?"

"Pretty well," replied my uncle. "I shall know better when we reach it."

"All right, sir. You're my passenger, and I'll keep to my bargain. But don't you blame me if anything goes wrong."

"I never shall, believe me," said my uncle.

"You won't," said the captain, and he walked aft, shaking his head as if our case was hopeless.

"Our friend is not very encouraging, Nat," said my uncle. "He believes that he knows better than we do, but I think we shall manage all the same. At any rate, we'll try."

"How far are we from the coast?" I asked.

"Not above a day's run," said my uncle; "so have all your traps ready for putting in the boat at any moment."

"Everything is ready, uncle," I said.

"That's right. I shall be glad to get ashore and to work."

"Not more glad than I shall be, uncle," I said. "I'm sick of being cooped up on board ship with this skipper—there, he's at it again."

The voice of the captain in a furious passion abusing someone, followed by the sound of a blow and a yelp such as a dog would give when kicked, made Uncle Dick frown.

"The brute!" he muttered. "How he does knock that poor lad about."

"It's shameful, uncle," I said, passionately, "if we stop on board much longer I shall tell him he's what you said."

"No, hold your tongue, Nat," said my uncle. "We have no right to interfere. He has often made my blood boil. Ah! don't laugh. I mean feel hot, sir."

"I wasn't going to laugh, uncle," I said. "It makes me wonder, though, how boys can want to come to sea."

"All captains are not like our friend yonder," said Uncle Dick. "But it seems to me that he's a tyrant to everyone on board. Who's being bullied now?"

For just then sharp words were being exchanged, and a gruff voice cried:

"Do. You hit me, and skipper or no skipper, I'll give it you back with interest!"

"What! you mutinous dog!" shouted the captain. "Here, boy, go down and fetch my revolver from the cabin."

"Bah!" came in a loud voice. "You daren't use it. If you did, the crew would put you in irons."

The ship's carpenter came by where we were stood, scowling fiercely at us both, walked to the forecastle hatch, and went below.

"Yes, Nat," said my uncle, "I think we shall be happier out in the woods. Don't you wish we had Ebo here?"

"I've often wished it, uncle," I said. "But perhaps we may pick up just such a fellow out yonder."

"Such pieces of luck don't happen twice to the same people. Hullo, here's poor Doldrums. Well, my lad, in trouble again?"

The ship's boy, a sallow, dirty-looking lad of about eighteen, but stunted and, dwarfed for his age, came shuffling by us, to follow the carpenter, and he held one hand to his eye and spoke in answer with his face half averted.

"Trouble again, sir?" said the poor fellow, half piteously, half in anger; "I aren't never been out of it since we sailed."

"What have you been doing? Here, let me look at your face."

"Oh, never mind that, sir," said the lad, shrinking.

"But I do mind," said my uncle. "Let me see."

Uncle Dick did not wait for the boy to take down his hand, but drew it away, to show that the eye was red and swollen up.

"Did the captain do that?" I said.

The lad nodded, and his forehead filled with lines.

"What had you been about?"

"Nothing, sir," said the lad bitterly.

"Then what had you left undone?"

"I dunno, sir. I try all day long to do what the skipper wants, but it's always kicks when it arn't blows; and when it's neither he's always swearing at me. I wish I was dead!" he cried passionately.

"Stop here," cried Uncle Dick, sharply, for the lad was moving off, with his eye covered up again.

Regularly cowed, the lad stopped short, flinching the while.

"Don't do that," said Uncle Dick. "I was not going to strike you."

"No, sir, but everybody else does, 'cept the carpenter. But I don't care now; I shall go overboard and end it."

"Why?" said Uncle Dick.

"Why, sir? What's the good o' living such a life as this?"

"This ship is not the whole world, my lad, and all the people are not like the captain."

The lad looked half wonderingly at my uncle, and then turned to me with so pitiful a look that I felt ready to take the poor fellow's part the next time he was in trouble.

"Everyone nearly seems the same to me," he said drearily. "I don't know why I come to sea. Thought it was all going to be adventures and pleasure, and it's all kicks and blows, just because I'm a boy."

The poor fellow looked enviously at me, and sniffing loudly, walked on.

"It ought to be stopped, uncle," I said. "The poor fellow's life is made miserable."

"Yes, Nat. It is terrible to see how one man can make other people's lives a burden to them. I'm a regular tyrant to you sometimes."

I laughed.

"Why, Aunt Sophy says you spoil me," I cried.

"Well, we will not argue about that, my boy," said my uncle; "we've too much to think about. In twenty-four hours we shall be afloat with our boat to ourselves; and the sooner the better,

for if she's out of the water much longer we shall have her leaky."

He walked to where our half-decked boat lay in its chocks, with all her tackle carefully lashed in place, and I could not help feeling proud of our possession, as I thought of the delights of our river trips to come, and the days when we should be busy drying and storing skins on board, for it was planned out that we were to make the rivers our highways as far as possible, and live on board, there being a snug cabin under the half-deck, while well-oiled sail-cloth was arranged to draw over the boom, which could be turned into the ridge pole of a roof, and shut in the after part of the boat, making all snug at night, or during a tropical downpour.

"She's rather too big for us, Nat," said my uncle, "and I hope they will have no accident when they lower her down."

"Oh, I hope not, uncle," I said.

"So do I, my boy, but they were clumsy enough in getting her on board. However, we shall have troubles in plenty without inventing any."

We stood together, leaning over the side and talking about our plans, which were to collect any new and striking birds that we could find, while specially devoting ourselves to shooting the quetzals, as they were called by the natives, the splendid trogons whose plumes were worn by the emperors of the past.

"And I'm not without hope, Nat," said my uncle, "that in course of our journeys up in the mountains, in the parts which have not yet been explored, we may find the Cock of the Rocks. I see no reason whatever why those birds should not inhabit suitable regions as far north as this. It is hot enough in Central America, as hot as Brazil, and far hotter than Peru."

"What about humming-birds, uncle," I said.

"We shall find plenty, and perhaps several that have never before been collected; but we must not want ordinary specimens. We must not overload ourselves, but get only what is choice."

Our conversation was interrupted by the coming of the captain, who looked at us searchingly.

"Well, doctor," he said; "been thinking it all over?"

"Yes," said Uncle Dick, quietly.

"And you're going to let me take you in to Belize?"

"Indeed I'm not," said my uncle quietly. "I made all my plans before I started, and explained to you before we sailed from Port Royal what I wished you to do."

"Well, yes, you did say something about it."

"The something was that you should drop me where I wished—somewhere in Yucatan or on Mosquito Coast."

"That's right, doctor; you did."

"Very well, then; according to your calculations at noon to-day, we shall be within sight of land about mid-day to-morrow."

"Dessay we shall, among the cays and reefs and little bits of islands yonder."

"Then you will fulfil your part of the agreement at mid-day."

"Drop you and your boat out at sea?"

"Yes," said Uncle Dick.

"I say; doctor, air you mad?"

"I hope not."

"Well, I begin to think you must be, for this is about the most unheard-of thing a man could do. You and this boy of yours have got to live."

"Of course," said my uncle.

"Well, what are you going to live on?"

"If I must explain, the stores contained in the cases you have of mine below."

"Hah!" cried the captain; "well, that's right, I suppose. But what about fresh water?"

"There is the cask, and a little tank belonging to the boat. They are both full, and we shall never be out of sight of land while on

the coast. Afterwards we shall be journeying up the different rivers."

"But when you've eaten all your stores, what then, doctor?"

"I hope we shall never be in that condition," said my uncle, "for we shall husband our stores as reserves, and live as much as we can upon the fish we catch and the birds we shoot."

"Ha, ha, ha!" laughed the captain. "Going up the rivers, air you?"

"Yes."

"Then you'd better try and ketch the sea cows. They're big as elephants, and one o' them'll last you two, six months if she don't go bad."

"Thank you," said my uncle, smiling; "but we shall be content with smaller deer than that."

"Well, I guess I don't like letting you go doctor," said the captain.

"So it seems," said my uncle quietly. "Pray why?"

"Don't seem fair to young squire here, for one thing."

"Have you any other reason?" said my uncle.

"You two can't manage a boat like that."

"We have managed a bigger one before. Any other reason?"

"Well, yes; you two'll come to grief, and I don't want to be brought to book for setting you adrift on about the maddest scheme I ever heerd tell of."

"Ah, now we understand one another," said my uncle, quietly. "Well, you may set you mind at rest, sir. I am the best judge of the risks to be run, and you will never be called to account for my actions."

"Well, don't blame me if you both find yourselves on your backs with fever."

"Never fear, captain," said my uncle. "If it is calm in the morning, as soon as we are within sight of land—"

"What land?"

"Any land on or off the coast, I shall be obliged by your getting my boat over the side, and the stores and chests out of the hold and cabin, so that we can get everything stowed away, then you can take us in tow, and I can cast off as soon as I like."

"All right," said the captain, and he went forward once more, while we two stayed on deck watching the wonderful sunset, till the great golden orange ball dipped down out of sight behind the clouds, which looked like ranges of mountains rising from some glorious shore.

We were not long afterwards made aware of the captain's reason for going forward, his voice rising in angry bullying tones, and we soon found that he and the fierce carpenter were engaged in a furious quarrel, which ended as quickly as it began, the captain making his reappearance, driving the ship's boy before him, and hastening the poor fellow's sluggish, unwilling movements by now and then giving him a kick.

Chapter Two.

Our Start.

My sleep was disturbed that night by dreams of sea cows as big as elephants, orange-coloured birds in huge flocks, and golden-green quetzals flying round my head, with their yard-long tails spread out, and their scarlet breasts gleaming in the sunshine which flashed through my cabin window.

I was puzzling myself as to how the beautiful birds could be out there at sea, and why it was that Uncle Dick and I could be walking about at the same time among golden mountains, which were, I felt sure, only last evening's sunset clouds, when all at once it was quite clear, for Uncle Dick cried:

"Now then, Nat, my boy, tumble out, tumble out. The sun's up, and we've no end to do. The men are at work already."

I was awake then, and after hurriedly dressing, I went on deck, to find out that the noises I had been hearing were caused by the men making fast some tackle to our boat, ropes being passed through a pulley block at the end of a swinging boom, and when they were ready the mate gave orders. Then the men

began to haul, and as the ropes tightened the heavy boat was lifted out of the chocks in which she lay, and with a good deal of creaking was swung out over the bulwarks quite clear of the steamer's side, and then lowered down with her bows much lower than the stern, so that it looked as if the boat we had trusted to for taking us many a long journey was about to dive down under the sea.

But she was too well built, and as she kissed the flashing waters she began to float, the stern part dipping lower till she was level, and the ropes grew slack, when all the men gave a cheer as she glided along beside the steamer, tugging at the rope which was made fast to her bows.

Next Uncle Dick went down into her with the carpenter, and I was left on deck to superintend the getting up of our chests and boxes of stores, which were lowered down into the boat, the carpenter; who looked quiet and civil enough now, working well at packing in the chests so that they fitted snugly together and took up little room.

Then our two small portmanteaus of clothes were swung down, followed by the cartridge-boxes and the long case which held our guns and rifles. Lastly the tank in the stern was filled with fresh water, and the little cask swung down and lashed under the middle thwart.

"How much more is there to come, Nat?" asked my uncle, as I stood on deck, looking down.

"That's all, uncle," I said.

"Bravo! for we're packed pretty close. Hardly room to move, eh, carpenter?"

"I don't see much the matter, sir," said the man. "Everything's nice and snug, and these boxes make like a deck. Bimeby when you've used your stores you can get rid of a chest or two."

"No," said Uncle Dick; "we shall want them to hold the specimens we shoot. But you've packed all in splendidly, my lad."

"Thankye, sir," said the man gruffly, and just then I heard a low weary sigh from somewhere close by, and turning sharply, I saw the ship's boy standing there with his left hand up to his face, looking at me piteously.

"Hallo!" I said, smiling; "how's the eye this morning?"

"Horrid bad, sir," he answered.

"Let me look."

He took away his hand slowly and unwillingly, showing that the eye was a good deal swollen and terribly blackened.

"You wouldn't like an eye like that, sir?" he said, with a faint smile.

"No," I said angrily; "and it's a great shame."

I hardly know how it was that I had it there, where money was not likely to be of use, but I had a two-shilling piece in my pocket, and I gave it to the poor fellow, as it seemed to me like showing more solid sympathy than empty words.

His face lit up so full of sunshine that I did not notice how dirty it was as he clapped the piece of silver to the swollen eye.

"That will not do any good," I said, laughing.

"Done a lot, sir," he answered—"that and what you said."

He made a curious sound as if he were half choking then, and turned sharply to run forward to the cook's galley.

By the time breakfast was over, land could be seen from the deck to starboard, port, and right forward—misty-looking land, like clouds settled here and there upon the surface of the sea.

This grew clearer and clearer, till about noon it was plain to see that some of the patches were islands, while farther to the west the mainland spread right and left with dim bluish-looking mountains in the distance.

It was early in the afternoon that the captain suddenly gave his orders, the engine was stopped, and the boat towing far astern began to grind up against the side, as it rose and fell on the heaving sea.

"Still of the same mind, doctor?" said the captain.

"Certainly, sir."

"Then now's your time. Over you go."

"I thought you would run in a few miles nearer," said Uncle Dick.

"Did you, sir?" said the captain roughly; "then you made a great mistake. This sea swarms with reefs and shoals nigher in, and I'm not going to be mad enough to risk my vessel, if you're mad enough to risk your life. Now, sir, please, I want to get ahead and claw off here before it falls calm. If I don't, some of these currents 'll be landing me where I don't want to go."

"We are ready," said Uncle Dick.

"Haul that boat abreast the starboard gangway!" shouted the captain, and a couple of men ran to obey the order.

"Well, good-bye, captain," said Uncle Dick, "and thank you for what you've done."

"Good-bye, sir, and good luck to you. You too, youngster; but it isn't too late yet."

"Much," said my uncle, and it seemed quite strange to me that what followed took so short a time. For one minute we were on the deck of the large vessel, the next we were standing up in our little boat, waving our hats to the crew, who had crowded to the side to give us a cheer; and the last faces I noted as they glided away were those of the carpenter and the boy, who gazed after us in a wistful way, the latter looking miserable in the extreme as he held his left hand over his eye.

Chapter Three.

Night Ashore.

I was brought back to the present by my uncle giving me a hearty slap on the shoulder.

"Ready to begin again, Nat?" he cried.

"Yes, uncle," I said eagerly. "It seems like the old days come back."

"Ship the rudder, then, while I hoist the sail. The skipper may be right, so let's make use of this soft breeze to get to the

mainland before the calm leaves us at the mercy of the currents."

A few minutes later the boat careened over gently, and glided fast through the water, while I steered, making for an opening which Uncle Dick made out with his glass to be the mouth of a valley running up the country.

"It's too far off to see all I want, Nat," he said, as he closed his glass; "but I fancy we shall find a river there, and we'll run in and try our luck. If there's nothing attractive about the place, we'll make a fresh start after a night's rest, and go on coasting along south till we find the sort of place we want. How well the boat sails with her load!"

On we glided, with the vessel we had left gradually getting hull down as the afternoon wore on, while we passed no less than three tempting-looking wooded islets where we might have landed to pass the night; but Uncle Dick shook his head.

"No, my boy," he said; "we'll keep to our course. There are more of these cays about, and we could land upon one if the wind dropped. As it holds fair, we'll run on to the mainland, for if it only keeps on till sunset, we shall reach the shore before dark."

Uncle Dick was right, and as it drew near sunset I was feasting my eyes on a wild-looking region whose beauty increased as we drew closer. There was dense mangrove jungle, then cliff covered with verdure, and this was broken up by patches of yellow sand backed by fringes of cocoanut grove, which again gave place to open park-like forest with big trees—this last where the great rocky bluff towered up with another eminence on the other side of the opening—but there was no river, nothing but a fine sandy cove, with a tiny stream running down from a patch of beautiful forest.

As we ran in we had our last sight of the distant vessel which had brought us so far on our journey, and Uncle Dick, who was standing up forward to direct me in my steering, cried—

"Nothing could be better, Nat. It's like landing on one of our old islands. Neither hut nor inhabitant to be seen. This is genuine wild country, and we shall find a river to-morrow. I was half afraid that we should be coming upon sugar or coffee plantations, or perhaps men cutting down the great mahogany trees."

I was as delighted as he was, for my mind was full of the gloriously-plumaged bird we meant to shoot, and there in imagination I peopled the flower-decked bushes with flashing humming-birds whose throats and crests glowed with scale-like feathers, brilliant as the precious stones—emerald, topaz, ruby, and sapphire—after which they were named. The great forest trees would be, I felt sure, full of the screaming parrot tribe, in their uniforms of leafy green, faced with orange, blue, and crimson; while, farther up the country, there would be the splendid quetzals, all metallic golden-green and scarlet.

But I had little time for thought. In a short time, in obedience to my uncle's orders, I had steered the boat right into the mouth of the little stream beyond where the salt waves broke; the sail was lowered and furled and the anchor carried ashore and fixed between two masses of rock, so that it could not be dragged out by the tugging of the craft.

"Wouldn't do to wake up and find our boat gone, Nat," said Uncle Dick, "if we set up our tent on shore. The sand looks very tempting, and we are not likely to be disturbed. But now then, start a fire, while I unpack some stores, and—yes—we will. We'll set up the tent to sleep under. More room to stretch our legs."

I was not long in getting a fire burning, with the kettle full of the beautiful rivulet water heating; while Uncle Dick stuck in the two pointed and forked sticks with which we were provided, laid the pole from fork to fork, and spread the oiled canvas sheet over it, so that there was a shelter from the night dews.

But before our coffee was ready and the bacon for our supper fried, night was upon us, and the bushes near scintillating in the most wondrous way, every twig seeming to be alive with fire-flies.

For a short space of time, as we sat there on the sands, partaking of our meal—than which nothing more delicious had ever passed my lips—all was still but the lapping of the tiny waves and the musical trickling of the rivulet amongst the rocks and stones. Then I jumped, for a peculiar cry arose from the forest behind us, and this seemed to be the signal for an outburst of sounds new to me, piping, thrumming, drumming, shrieking, howling, grunting in every variety, and I turned to look in Uncle Dick's face, which was lit up by the glow from our little wood fire.

"Brings back old times in the South American forests, Nat," he said coolly. "I could put a name to nearly every musician at work in Nature's orchestra yonder."

"What was that horrible cry?" I whispered. "Jaguar or puma?"

"Neither, my boy; only a heron or crane somewhere up the stream."

"That snorting croak, then?"

"Only frogs or toads, Nat; and that chirruping whirring is something in the cricket or cicada way. If we heard a jaguar or puma, it would most likely be a magnified tom-cat-like sort of sound."

"But that mournful howl, uncle?" I whispered.

"A poor, melancholy spider-monkey saying good-night to his friends in the big trees. Most of the other cries are made by night-birds out on the hunt for their suppers. That cry was made by a goat-sucker, one of those 'Chuck-Will's-widow' sort of fellows. They're very peculiar, these night-hawks. Even ours at home keeps up that whirring, spinning-wheel-like sound in the Surrey and Sussex fir-woods. Ah, that's a dangerous creature, if you like!" he said, in a whisper.

"Which?" I said, below my breath.

"That piping *ping-wing-wing*."

"Why, that's a mosquito, uncle," I cried contemptuously.

"The only thing likely to attack us to-night, Nat," he said, laughing; "but we'll have the guns and everything ready all the same."

"To shoot the mosquitoes, uncle?"

"No, but anything that might—mind, I say *might*—come snuffing about us."

Uncle Dick was so calm and cool over it that he made me the same, and the little nervous sensation caused by the novelty of my position soon passed away. The guns were loaded and laid ready, a couple of blankets spread, and utterly wearied out, after making up the fire, we crept into our tent and lay down to get a good night's sleep.

"We'll rest on shore wherever it's safe, Nat," were Uncle Dick's last words. "It's nicer to have the solid ground under you. This is a treat; the sand's like a feather bed; but we shan't often have such a luxurious place. Good-night."

"One moment, uncle," I whispered, as I heard a rustling sound somewhere in the bushes. "What do you think is making that?"

I waited for him to answer, under the impression that he was listening to make sure before he replied; but as he took no heed, I spoke again, but only to hear his hard breathing, for he was fast asleep, and I started up in horror, for the strange rustling sound, as of a huge snake or alligator creeping through the dry grass and bushes, began again much nearer than before.

Chapter Four.

The Dangers of the Night.

It is not pleasant to hear a noise as of something forcing its way through bushes close by your bedside, when instead of the strong walls of a house in a thickly inhabited place, with police to protect you, there is nothing but a thin piece of canvas between you and a forest swarming, for aught you can tell, with hosts of dangerous creatures seeking their prey.

I felt that in my first night where I lay by the outskirts of one of the Central American forests, and I should have seized Uncle Dick by the arm and shaken him into wakefulness but for the dread of being considered cowardly.

For he seemed so calm and confident that I dared not wake him up, to be told that the noise I heard was only made by some innocent animal that would flee for its life if I slipped outside.

"I wonder whether that would," I said to myself. "I'll try."

I made up my mind that I would take my double gun from where it lay beside me and go out; but it was a long time before I could make up my body to act; and when at last, in anger with myself for being so cowardly, I did creep out softly and make a dash in the direction of the sound, I was bathed in perspiration, and my legs shook beneath me, for I felt certain that the next

minute I should be seized by some monstrous creature ready to spring at me out of the darkness.

But nothing did seize me. For there was a thud and a faint crash repeated again and again, and though I could not see, I felt certain that the fire had attracted some deer-like creature, which had gone bounding off, till all was silent again, when I crept back, letting the canvas fall behind me, feeling horribly conceited, and thinking what a brave fellow I must be.

I must have gone off to sleep directly I lay down then, for one moment I was looking at the dull-reddish patch in the canvas behind which the fire was burning, and the next everything was blank, till all at once I was wide awake, with a hand laid across my mouth, and the interior of our scrap of a tent so dark that I could see nothing; but I could hear someone breathing, and directly after Uncle Dick whispered:

"Lie still—don't speak."

He removed his hand then, and seemed to be listening.

"Hear anything, Nat?" he said.

"Not now, uncle. I did a little while ago, and took my gun and went out."

"Ah! What was it?"

"Some kind of deer, and it bounded away."

"It was no deer that I heard, my boy," he whispered, "but something big and heavy. Whatever it was trod upon a stick or a shell, and it snapped loudly and woke me up. There it is again."

I heard the sound quite plainly in the darkness, and it was exactly as Uncle Dick described, but I leaned towards its being a fragile shell trodden on by some big animal or a man.

"Couldn't be one of the great cats?" I whispered.

"Oh, no! they tread like velvet."

"Could it be a tapir?"

"Not a likely place for one. Hist!"

I was silent, and lay listening, so to speak, with all my might, till a low swishing sound reached us, just as if someone had brushed against a bush.

Uncle Dick laid his hand upon my shoulder, and he pressed it hard, as if silently saying, "Did you hear that?"

I answered him in a similar way, and then he whispered:

"Someone is prowling round the tent, and we shall have to go out and challenge them."

"Suppose they are savages with bows and arrows?" I whispered back.

"Too dark for them to take aim," he said. "A bold dash out will scare them, and I'll fire over their heads."

I felt as if it would be safer to stay where we were; but it seemed cowardly, so I was silent.

"I'll go out at once," said Uncle Dick, and I was silent for a moment, and then rose with my gun ready.

"I'll come with you, uncle," I whispered.

He pressed my hand before creeping softly out; and I followed, to find that the darkness was as black as inside the tent; that the fire-flies had ceased to shimmer and flash about the low trees, and that the fire was so nearly out that there was nothing visible but a faint glow.

"Stand fast," whispered Uncle Dick, "while I throw on some of the light twigs we put ready."

I did not remember putting any light twigs ready, nor anything else just then, for my head was full of wild thoughts, and I was straining my eyesight in all directions, with my gun cocked and ready to fire at the first attack.

All at once there was a rustle as the twigs were thrown on the glowing embers; a sharp crackling followed, and a bright flame sprang up.

At almost the same moment there came from the trees beyond the sound of a rush being made through the bushes, and then the report of Uncle Dick's gun as he fired twice.

Someone uttered an ejaculation, the rushing sound increased, and directly after there came a loud crashing noise as if someone had fallen; but he—or it—was up again directly, and our enemies, by the splashing and crackling sounds, seemed to be retreating up the bed of the rivulet.

I stood ready to fire, but reserved my shot, as there seemed to be no need; and as I listened intently I could hear Uncle Dick slipping fresh cartridges into his gun, and the click it gave as he closed the breech.

"Hadn't we better get into shelter?" I whispered. "We offer such a good mark for an arrow."

"No, my boy," said my uncle; "the fire is between us and the enemy, and we are quite safe."

For the twigs were blazing merrily now, and sending out a bright light, which spread around and made the nearest trees stand out and the little tent look bright and clear.

But the next moment something else caught my eye, and the startled sensation seemed to cause a catching of my breath as I stood pointing down at the smooth patch of sand beside the trickling water of the stream—a patch over which a wave must have lately passed, it was so smooth, while close up towards the fire, and where the full blaze of light played, were the objects which had struck my eye.

"What is it, Nat?" said my uncle sharply, and then as he caught sight of the marks too, he answered his own question aloud:

"Footprints—men's—yes, more than one. Hah! Look-out, Nat; I can hear them coming back."

Uncle Dick's ears seemed to be sharper than mine, for though I listened intently and stood prepared to fire, some minutes elapsed before I heard a sound, and then it was not from up the stream, but from overhead—a sharp whistling cry—which was repeated again and again, and I caught the flash of wings as a large bird circled round, evidently attracted by the fire, which was kept blazing.

"Throw on some more, Nat," said my uncle; "it will serve to keep them at a distance. Perhaps we've scared the savages off for good."

"I hope so," I said; "but we mustn't go to sleep again."

"You're a queer chap, Nat, if you could go to sleep after this; I couldn't."

"But they may not be savages, uncle," I said.

"Perhaps not, but the place seemed so wild that I don't think they could be anything else. We must take turn and turn to watch till daylight. You go and lie down."

"No, uncle," I said; "I'd rather stay and watch. What time is it?"

"About midnight, I should think," he said, pulling out the big old silver hunting-watch that accompanied him on all his travels, and holding it down in the full light from the fire. "Humph!" he ejaculated. "What time do you say?"

"Not much more than ten," I said decisively. "I had only just dropped asleep."

"It took you a long time to drop, then," he said drily. "Ah! Look at that bird. It will sing its wings directly."

"What time is it, then?" I said, for I was more interested in knowing how long I should have to watch in the darkness than in the flight of a bird.

"Like to know exactly, Nat?" said my uncle.

"Of course," I said, wonderingly.

"You shall, then, my boy. It's ten minutes, thirty seconds, past six."

"Nonsense, uncle!" I cried. "The old watch must have stopped. Did you forget to wind it up?"

For answer he held it to my ear, and it was ticking loudly, while as he lowered it and I glanced at the face, I could see that the second hand had moved some distance on.

"Do you think it is right?" I said.

"Yes; we were fagged out last night and slept very soundly. You'll soon know, for it will be daylight directly."

Both the watch and my uncle were right—for the scream of a parrot reached my ears soon after, followed by whistlings and pipings from the forest; while soon after a horribly harsh grating

screech came from overhead, and I caught a glimpse of the bird which uttered it—one of the great long-tailed Aras, on its way with three or four more to a favourite part of the forest.

"Going figging, Nat," said my uncle, putting some more wood on the fire, not for the sake of the light—for away across the sea the dawn was brightening fast, after the way of sunrise and sunset in tropic lands; and even as I looked there, far on high, was a faint fleck of orange light on a tiny cloud. A few minutes later there were scores, and the birds were singing and chirping in all directions, even the sea furnishing the screams and peculiar cries of the various ducks and gulls.

"How glorious!" I said softly, for the beauty of the scene around in the glow of the morning light made me forget the darkness of the night and the terrors that it brought.

"Yes, Nat; we've hit upon birdland the first try," said my uncle. "But it seems as if we shall have to leave it unless we can be sure that the Indians are friendly."

As he spoke, we both examined the footprints again.

"Savage marks for certain, Nat," said my uncle. "Do you see? These fellows have not been in the habit of wearing shoes."

"Yes, I see," I replied. "The big toe so wide away from the others."

"You see that at a glance. I suppose it would be unwise to follow them; they would hear us coming, and might send a couple of arrows into us—perhaps poisoned. It's a pity Nat; for there are plenty of birds about, and we could get some good specimens.—Yes; what is it?"

"They've been all along here, right down to the sea, uncle. See their tracks?"

"Yes; and I can see something else," he said, shading his eyes, and looking to right and left anxiously in the now broad daylight.

"What can you see?" I asked.

He pointed now, and I saw what he meant.

"The marks made by a boat," I said. "Why, uncle, they must have come in a canoe, and been attracted by our fire. Can you see their canoe?"

"No," said my uncle, after a long look round and away over the glittering waters. "But it's bad, Nat. They will not have gone far away, and will be coming back here in search of it."

"Then we shall have to take to the boat again and sail farther down the coast."

"We'd better get on board, my lad, certainly," said my uncle; "so let's roll up the tent, and—ah! look-out! Quick, lad—your gun!"

I was ready directly, cocked both barrels of my piece, my heart beating fast in the emergency—for the danger we dreaded seemed to be at hand.

Chapter Five.

A Surprise.

"Ahoy! Don't shoot," came from out of the dense jungle up the stream.

"Why, uncle," I cried, "that doesn't sound like a savage."

"It's worse, Nat," said my uncle. "There's a terribly English sound about it."

"Ahoy, I say!" came again. "Don't shoot!"

"Ahoy! who are you?" shouted my uncle.

"Don't shoot, and we'll come out," came in tones half smothered by the thick growth.

"We're not going to fire. Who are you, and what are you doing here?"

There was a sharp brushing sound of leafage being forced aside, the splashing of feet in water, and the soft rattle of pebbles being moved in the stream bed by feet, and the next minute two figures came from under the pendent bough, which nearly

touched the water and stood in the bright glow of the rising sun, while astonishment brought the words to our lips:

"The carpenter!" cried my uncle. And I burst out laughing as I said:

"That boy!"

"Why, we took you for savages," said my uncle. "Was it you two who came to the fire last night?"

"And you shot at us," said the boy, in a doleful voice.

"Shot at you?" cried my uncle angrily. "Of course I did. How dare you come prowling about our tent in the dead of night!"

"Didn't prowl, sir," said the boy humbly. "We could see your fire burning like a light as we come along, and we came straight to it, landed—and landed—and you came out, sir—came out, sir—and fired at us."

"Then you should have shouted."

"Yes, sir," said the boy, "but we was afraid to—feared you'd fire at us."

"But you see now, you came the wrong way."

"Yes, sir," said the boy, glancing at the carpenter; "we did come the wrong way."

"Well, what is it? Did we leave anything behind? Very good of the captain to send you."

"Didn't send us, sir," said the boy, looking down.

"Not send you?" cried Uncle Dick, staring. "How is it you came, then?"

The boy shifted his weight from one foot to the other, scooping up the dry sand with his toes, and turned to his companion, who gave me a peculiar look and stood frowning.

"Why don't you speak out and tell the gentleman, Bill Cross?"

"I left it to you, boy. You've got a tongue in your head."

"Yes; but you're bigger and older than me. But I don't mind telling. You see, Mr Nat, sir," he said, suddenly turning to me, "I couldn't stand it any longer. They was killing of me, and as soon as you was gone, sir, it seemed so much worse that I went and shook hands with Bill Cross, who was the only one who ever said a kind word to me, and I telled him what I was going to do."

"Told him you were going to run away?" said my uncle.

"No, sir," said the boy promptly. "I telled him I'd come to say good-bye, for as soon as it was too dark for them to see to save me I was going to—"

"Run away?" said my uncle sternly, for the boy had stopped short.

"No, sir," he resumed; "I was going to jump overboard."

"Why, you miserable, wicked young rascal, how dare you tell me such a thing as that?" cried my uncle.

The boy gave a loud sniff.

"That's just what Bill Cross said, sir: and that he'd knock my blessed young head off if I dared to do such a thing."

"Did you say that?" asked my uncle.

"Yes, sir, I did, sir," said the man gruffly; "and a very stupid thing too."

"How stupid?" said my uncle.

"If he drowned himself and went to the bottom, how was I ever to get the chance to hit him, sir?"

"Humph! I see," said my uncle; "but you meant right. And what then?" he continued, turning back to the boy.

"Bill Cross said, sir, that if I'd got the spirit of a cockroach I wouldn't do that. 'Cut and run,' he says."

"Quite right," said my uncle. "I mean, get to another ship."

"'Where am I to run to?' I says. 'I can't run atop of the water.'"

"No," he says; 'but you could get in a boat when it was dark and row away.' 'I dursen't,' I says; 'it would be stealing the boat.' 'You could borrow it,' he says; 'that's what I'm going to do.' 'You are?' I says. 'I am,' he says; 'for I'd sooner die o' thirst on the roaring main,' he says, 'than put up with any more.' You did, didn't you, mate?" he cried, appealingly.

"I did," growled the carpenter; "and I stick to it."

"He said that as soon as it was dark he should manage to lower one of the boats and follow yours, and ask you to take him as crew; and if you wouldn't, he should go ashore and turn Robinson Crusoe."

"That's right, boy," said the carpenter; "and I would."

"And I says to him, sir, 'Bill Cross,' I says, 'if I tars myself black, will you let me come with you and be your man Friday?'"

"And what did he say to that?" asked my uncle, frowning.

"Said I was black enough already, sir, without my having a black eye; and if I come with him, he'd promise me never to behave half so bad as the skipper did, so of course I come."

"Took one of the ship's boats and stole away with it?" said my uncle.

The boy nodded, and my uncle turned to the carpenter.

"Is this all true?" he asked.

"Yes, sir, every word of it. You know how bad it was."

"And you followed our boat?"

"Followed the way we last saw your sail, sir, for long before it was dark the boat went out of sight. But just as I'd give up all hope of seeing it again, we saw your fire like a spark on shore, and we come after that."

"Rowed?" I said.

"No, sir; sailed. There's a little lug-sail to the boat. We didn't lose sight of the fire again, and at last we ran our boat ashore."

"And you've come to offer your services?" said my uncle.

"Yes, sir," said the man gruffly.

"But even if I could take you under the circumstances, I don't want the services of any man."

"Your's is a big boat, sir, and hard to manage, particular at sea," said the carpenter.

"I know the boat's capabilities better than you can tell me," said my uncle shortly, "and I do not require help."

"Then we've made a bad job of it, boy," said the carpenter.

"The gentleman don't know what we can do, Bill, and how useful we should be."

"I daresay," said my uncle, frowning, "but I do not want a man, nor another lad."

"If you'll only let me stop, sir," said the boy piteously. "I don't want no wages, and I won't eat much, only what you've done with, and there arn't nothing I won't do. I'll carry anything, and work—oh, how I will work! I'll be like your dog, I will, and you can both knock me about and kick me, and I won't say a word. You won't hit me half so hard as the skipper and the men did; and even if you did, you're only two, and there's twenty of them; so if you're allus doing it I shall be ten times better off."

"It's my duty to send you and your mate, here, back to the ship," said Uncle Dick.

"Oh, don't say that, sir," cried the boy; "but if you did, we shouldn't go, for Bill Cross said if you wouldn't take us along with you we'd go and live in the woods, and if we starved to death there, we should be better off than aboard ship."

"But you signed for the voyage, my man," said Uncle Dick, "and if I consented to take you with me I should be helping you to defraud the owners."

"Serve the owners right, sir, for having their people treated like dogs, or worse," growled the carpenter. "'Sides, I don't see what fraud there is in it. I've worked hard these two months, and drawn no pay. They'll get that, and they may have it and welcome."

"That's all very well," said Uncle Dick, "but a bargain's a bargain. The want of two hands in an emergency may mean the

loss of the ship, and you and this lad have deserted. No; I can't agree to it; you must take your boat and go back."

"Can't, sir, now," said the carpenter bitterly; "and I thought we was coming to English gentlemen who would behave to a couple of poor wretches like Christians."

"It is no part of a Christian's duty to be unjust. You know you have done wrong and have helped this poor lad to do the same," said my uncle.

"I should have fought it out, sir, if it hadn't been for the poor boy. Dog's life's nothing to what he went through."

"Where is your boat?" said Uncle Dick, suddenly.

The carpenter laughed.

"I dunno, sir," he said; "we sent her adrift when we landed, and you know what the currents are along here better, p'raps, than I do."

"What! you've sent your boat adrift?"

"Yes, sir; we made up our minds to cut and run, and we can't go back now. We didn't want to steal the boat. They'll get it again."

Uncle Dick frowned and turned to me.

"This is a pretty state of affairs, Nat; and it's like forcing us to take them on board and sail after the steamer. What's to be done?"

"Cannot we keep them, uncle?"

"Keep them? I don't want a boy to kick and knock about and jump on, sir. Do you?"

"Well, no, uncle," I said; "but—"

"But! Yes, it's all very well to say 'but,' my lad. You don't see how serious it is."

"I'd serve you faithful, sir," said the carpenter. "I'm not going to brag, but I'm a handy man, sir. You might get a hole in the boat, and I didn't bring no clothes, but I brought my tools, and I'm at home over a job like that. You might want a hut knocked

up, or your guns mended. I'd do anything, sir, and I don't ask for pay. It might come to your wanting help with the blacks. If you did, I'd fight for you all I could."

"Well, I don't know what to do, Nat. What do you say?"

The boy darted forward wildly and threw himself upon his knees.

"Say yes, Mr Nat; say yes!" he cried imploringly. "Don't send us off, sir, and you shan't never repent it. You know what made us run away. Say yes, sir; oh, say yes!"

"I can't say anything else, uncle," I said, in a husky voice.

"Hooray!" yelled the boy, throwing his cap in the air. "Do you hear, Bill Cross? The gentleman says 'yes'!"

The loud shout and the flying up of the cap had the effect of starting a little flock of birds from the nearest trees, and, obeying the instinct of the moment, Uncle Dick raised his gun and fired—two barrels, each of which laid low one of the birds, which dropped in different directions.

I was off after one of them directly, and, in utter disregard of Uncle Dick's warning shout, the boy was off after the other, but took some time to find it in the dense growth amongst which it had fallen.

"A beautiful little finch, uncle," I said, as I brought back my prize.

"Lovely!" he cried. "I never saw one like this before. It's a pity I did not stop that fellow. He will have spoiled the other."

But he was wrong, for the boy was just then coming from among the low bushes, carefully bearing the second bird upon the top of his cap, which he held between his hands like a tray.

"Is he all right, sir?" said the bearer excitedly. "I picked him up by his neb and never touched his feathers."

"Yes, in capital order," said Uncle Dick. "Come, you've begun well!"

The boy's eyes flashed with pleasure, and taking advantage of Uncle Dick being busy over the birds, he turned to me.

"Then we may stop with you, Master Nat?" he whispered.

"I suppose so, but you must wait and see what my uncle says. I say, though," I cried, "will you keep your face clean if you're allowed to stay?"

"Face? Clean?" he said, passing his dirty hand over his dingy countenance. "Ain't it clean now?"

I burst into a roar of laughter, for the poor fellow's face was not only thoroughly grubby, but decorated with two good-sized smudges of tar.

"You mean it's dirty, Mr Nat," he said seriously. "All right; I'll go and scrub it."

The next minute he was down on his knee at the water's edge scooping up a handful of muddy sand and, as he termed it, scrubbing away as if he would take off all the skin, and puffing and blowing the while like a grampus, while the carpenter looked on as much amused as I. But he turned serious directly, and with an earnest look in his eyes he said:

"Thank you for what you said, Mr Nat, sir. You shan't find me ungrateful."

I nodded, and walked away to join my uncle, for I always hated to be talked to like that.

Uncle Dick had his small case open, with its knife; cotton-wire, thread, and bottle of preserving cream, and when I joined him where he was seated he had already stripped the skin off one of the birds, and was painting the inside cover with the softened paste; while a few minutes later he had turned the skin back over a pad of cotton-wool, so deftly that, as the feathers fell naturally into their places and he tied the legs together, it was hard to believe that there was nothing but plumage, the skin, and a few bones.

"Open the case," he said, and as I did so he laid his new specimen upon a bed of cotton-wool, leaving room for the other bird, and went on skinning in the quick clever way due to long practice.

"It doesn't take those two fellows long to settle down, Nat," he said, as he went on.

"No, uncle," I replied, as I turned my eyes to where the boy had given himself a final sluice and was now drying his face and head pounce-powder fashion. That is to say, after the manner in which people dried up freshly-written letters before the days of blotting-paper. For the boy had moved to a heap of dry sand and with his eyes closely shut was throwing that on his face and over his short hair.

"There's no question of right or wrong," said my uncle quietly. "If we do not take these fellows with us it means leaving them to starve to death in the forest, for they have neither gun, boat, nor fishing tackle."

"But it would be wrong not to take them," I said.

"Yes," replied my uncle drily. Then he was silent for a few minutes while he turned back the skin from the bird's wing joints, and all at once made me look at him wonderingly, for he said "Bill!" with the handle of the knife in his teeth.

"What about Bill?" I said.

"Bill—Cross," continued my uncle. "What's the other's name?"

"Boy," I said, laughing. "I never heard him called anything else. Hadn't we better call the carpenter Man?"

"It would be just as reasonable," said my uncle. "Ask the boy his name."

By this time our new acquisition was dry, and I stared at him, for he seemed to be someone else as he dusted off the last of the sand.

It was not merely that he had got rid of the dirt and reduced the tar smudges, but that something within was lighting up his whole face in a pleasant, hearty grin as he looked up at me brightly in a way I had never seen before.

"Is my face better, Mr Nat?" he said.

"Yes," I said, "ever so much; and you must keep it so."

"Oh, yes," he said seriously; "I will now. It was no good before."

"What's your name?" I said.

He showed his white teeth.

"Name? They always called me Boy on board," he replied.

"Yes, but you've got a name like anyone else," I said.

"Oh, yes, sir," he replied, wrinkling up his forehead as if thinking deeply; "I've got a name somewheres, but I've never seemed to want it. Got most knocked out of me. It's Peter, I know; but—I say, Bill Cross," he cried sharply, "what's my name?"

The carpenter smiled grimly, and gave me a sharp look as much as to say, "Wait a minute and you shall see me draw him out."

"Name, my lad," he said. "Here, I say, you haven't gone and knocked your direction off your knowledge box, have you?"

"I dunno," said the boy, staring. "I can't 'member it."

"Where was it stuck on—your back?"

"Nay, it was in my head if it was anywhere. Gahn! You're laughing at me. Here! I know, Mr Nat; it's Horn—Peter Horn. That's it."

"Well, you are a thick-skulled one, Pete, not to know your own name."

"Yes," replied the boy thoughtfully; "it's being knocked about the head so did it, I s'pose. What shall I do now, sir? Light a fire?"

"Yes, at once," I said, for the thought made me know that I was hungry. "Make it now between those pieces of rock yonder by the boat."

The boy went off eagerly; Cross followed; and I went back, to find my uncle finishing the second skin.

"That's a good beginning, Nat," he said. "Now, then, the next thing is to see about breakfast."

"And after that, uncle?"

"Then we'll be guided by circumstances, Nat," he replied. "What we have to do is to get into the wildest places we can find where its river, forest, or mountain."

"Isn't this wild enough?" I said.

"Yes, my boy; but I want to get up into the interior, and we must find a road."

"A road means civilisation," I said.

"Ah! but I mean one of Nature's roads—a river. Sooner or later we shall find one up which we can sail, and when that is no longer possible we must row or pole."

"Then we shall find the advantage, uncle, of having a little crew, and—what's the matter now?"

I stared in astonishment, for the minute before Pete and the carpenter were busy feeding the fire and trying to get the kettle they had swung, gypsy fashion, on three bamboos, to boil. Now they were both crawling towards us on all-fours, Pete getting over the ground like a dog.

"It's all over, Master Nat, and good-bye if yer never sees us again. It's Robinson Crusoe out in the woods now."

"Why, Bill," I said, "has he gone mad?"

"Pretty nigh, sir. Look."

"Look at what?"

"Steamer, sir, found the boat, I s'pose, and they're coming round the point to pick us up. Good luck to you, gentlemen, and good-bye."

He plunged after Pete into the bed of the stream, and they disappeared in the jungle, just as the steamer in full sail and close in came gliding into our sight, towing a boat astern.

Chapter Six.

A False Alarm.

"It looks bad for them, poor fellows!" said my uncle, shading his eyes to gaze seaward. "The captain means to have them back."

"Nonsense! uncle," I said; "it's a false alarm. That's not our ship."

"Not our ship?" he cried, springing up. "Of course it's not. And whatever she is those on board don't see us."

We stood watching for a few minutes before I ran to the boat and got the glass out of the locker to have a good look.

"Well, what do you make of her?" said my uncle.

"I don't know what she is," I said; "but there are only two people on deck—one forward and the other leaning half asleep over the wheel. Here, I'll go and call those two back."

"You'd call in vain," said my uncle, as I replaced the glass in the case. "They're beyond earshot, and you could not find them."

"What are we to do then, uncle?" I said.

"Have breakfast, my boy. I want mine."

"But those two poor fellows?"

"Well, they took fright, Nat. A guilty conscience needs no accuser. They had run from their ship, and the sight of one was enough to make them feel that they were being sought."

"But we ought to do something, uncle," I said.

"We can't do anything but wait, my lad," he replied. "There, don't be uneasy; they'll come back as soon as they've got over the scaring. I daresay we shall see or hear of them before night."

My uncle's words brought back the hungry feeling which had been swept away, and I saw to the breakfast, making the coffee and frizzling some slices of bacon, the meal being thoroughly enjoyable, eaten there in the shade of a great tree, while everything around looked beautiful in the extreme; and it was not until my morning hunger was nearly appeased that the flies and the flying thoughts of our late companions tormented me much.

Then they began to get worse; and in a fit of sympathy I felt ashamed of enjoying my meal so well while those two poor fellows were suffering from hunger and fear.

"What's the matter, Nat?" said my uncle; and then, "Look! Who'd have thought of seeing humming-birds so near the sea?"

I did not reply, for I did not know which part of my uncle's remark to answer first; so I stared at the lovely little birds flitting about some flowers.

"Steamer's getting a good way along," said my uncle, after a few minutes' silence. "Here, I must have two or three of those little beauties."

"They're not quetzals, uncle," I said, smiling.

"No; but I'm not going to miss getting rare specimens, Nat. We may not find the quetzals, and we must not go back empty-handed. Is the anchor quite fast?"

"Yes, uncle, perfectly," I said.

"Then let's get what good birds we can while we're waiting. The sound of our guns may bring those fellows back."

He was right, for about mid-day, when we were busily preparing some skins of the lovely little humming-birds we had shot, I caught up the gun by my side, for there was a peculiar piping cry.

"What bird's that?" I said, in a sharp whisper.

"Pee-wew!" came softly.

"Some kind of sea bird," said my uncle. "It sounds like a gull."

I laughed, and laid down my gun.

"Why are you doing that?" said my uncle.

"Pee-wee!" came the cry again.

"Pee-wee!" I whistled, and then I shouted aloud, "All right! Steamer's gone."

There was the cracking of twigs and a loud rustling sound, followed by the sight of Pete, who crept out from among the bushes, hot, panting, and with face and hands terribly scratched.

"Sure she's gone, Master Nat?" he said dolefully.

"Sure? Yes," I cried. "It wasn't our ship at all."

"There, I knowed it warn't all the time, only Bill Cross said he was sure it were. Here, come out! Way he! it's all right."

The carpenter forced his way out of the jungle soon after, glaring at Pete.

"Here," he cried gruffly, "what d'ye mean by scaring a fellow like that?"

"It warn't me," cried Pete. "You said it was our ship coming after us."

"Never mind, now," said my uncle. "Set the fire going again, and get yourselves some breakfast; but don't be in such a hurry to take fright next time. We'd better have our dinner at the same time, Nat; and if there's any wind this evening we'll sail southward."

There was plenty of wind, and so quite early in the afternoon the anchor was placed on board, Pete tucked up his trousers and ran the boat out, and then scrambled in to help with the sail. Then, as the boat careened over and glided away, he and his companion gave a hearty cheer.

We sailed along the coast southward for days and days, always finding plenty to interest and a few specimens worth shooting, both Bill and Pete looking on with the most intense interest at the skinning and preserving, till one day the latter said confidently:

"I could do that, Mr Nat."

"Very well," I said; "you shall try with one of the next birds I shoot."

"At last," cried my uncle a day or two later, and, seizing the tiller, he steered the boat straight for a wide opening and into what seemed to be a lake, so surrounded were we by tropical trees.

But the current we met soon showed that we were at the mouth of a good-sized river, and the wind being in our favour, we ran up it a dozen miles or so before evening.

For a long time the shores right and left had been closing in, and our progress growing slower, for the forest, which had been at some distance, now came down to the water's edge, the trees were bigger, and for the last two miles we had sailed very

slowly, shut in as we were by the great walls of verdure which towered far above the top of our mast and completely shut out the wind.

Fortunately, the river was deep and sluggish so that progression was comparatively easy, and every hundred yards displayed something tempting to so ardent a naturalist as my uncle.

Not always pleasant, though, for the sluggish waters swarmed with huge alligators, and every now and then one plunged in from the bank with a mighty splash.

Some of the first we saw were approached innocently enough—for to unaccustomed eyes they looked like muddy logs floating down stream, and Pete laughed at me when I told him to lift his oar as we passed one so drowsy that it paid no heed.

"Raise your oar-blade," I said, as we glided along, "or that brute may turn angry and upset us."

I was sitting holding the tiller, steering, and Bill Cross held the other oar, while my uncle, tired out by a tramp ashore, was lying down forward, fast asleep, in the shadow cast by the sail, which kept on filling and flapping—for in the reach we had now entered the wind was hardly felt.

"I never saw a tree run at a boat, Master Nat," said Pete, as he raised his oar-blade. But before we had half passed the sleeping reptile the boy gave it a sudden chop on the back, and then, horrified by the consequence of his act, he started up in his place, plunged overboard into the deep, muddy water on the other side, and disappeared.

For a moment or two I thought that we were all going to follow, for the reptile struck the boat a tremendous blow with its tail as it plunged down, raising the river in waves and eddies, and making our craft dance so that the water nearly came over the side, and we all clung to the nearest object to our hands.

"What's that?" cried my uncle.

"Alligator," I said, in a startled tone.

"Where's the boy?"

"Gone overboard."

"Not seized by one of the loathsome monsters?"

"Oh, no, sir," said Bill, who looked rather startled. "He chopped it, and it scared him over the side."

"Well, where is he?" cried my uncle, appealing to me, while I looked vainly over the surface, which was now settling down.

"I—I don't know," I stammered. "He went over somewhere here."

"But where did he come up?" cried my uncle. "Haven't you seen him?"

I was silent, for a terrible feeling of dread kept me from speaking, and my uncle turned to the carpenter.

"No, sir, I haven't seen him," was the reply.

"Let the boat drift down. Don't pull, man, you're sending us over to the other side. Stop a moment."

My uncle hurriedly took Pete's place, seized the oar that was swinging from the rowlock, and began to pull so as to keep the boat from drifting, while I steered.

"Hadn't you better let her go down a bit, sir?" said the carpenter. "He may be drifting, and will come up lower."

"But the lad could swim," said my uncle, as I began to feel a horrible chill which made my hands grow clammy.

"Swim? Yes, sir—like a seal. I'm getting skeart. One of they great lizardy things must have got him."

"Cease rowing!" cried my uncle, and he followed my example of standing up in the boat and scanning the surface, including the nearest shore—that on our left, where the trees came right down to the water.

They stopped together, and let the boat drift slowly with the current downward and backward, till all at once there was a light puff of hot wind which filled the sail, and we mastered the current, once more gliding slowly up stream, with the water pattering against the sides and bows.

But there was no sign of Pete, and having failed to take any bearings, or to remember by marks on the shore whereabouts he had gone down, we were quite at fault, so that when the

wind failed again and the boat drifted back, it was impossible to say where we had seen the last of the poor lad.

I felt choking. Something seemed to rise in my throat, and I could only sit there dumb and motionless, till all at once, as the wind sprang up again, filled the sail, and the boat heeled over, the necessity of doing something to steer her and keep her in the right direction sent a thrill through me, and I did what I ought to have done before.

For, as the water rattled again under the bows and we glided on, I shouted aloud—

"Pete, lad, where are you?"

"Ahoy!" came from a distance higher up, farther than we could have deemed possible after so much sailing.

"Hooray!" shouted the carpenter. "Why he's got ashore yonder."

"Where did the hail come from, Nat?" said my uncle, with a sigh of relief.

"Seemed to be from among the trees a hundred yards forward there to the left."

"Run her close in, then, and hail, my lad," he cried.

He had hardly spoken before the wind failed again, and they bent to their oars.

"Where are you, Pete?" I shouted.

"Here, among the trees," came back, and I steered the boat in the direction, eagerly searching the great green wall of verdure, but seeing nothing save a bird or two.

"Are you ashore?" I shouted.

"Nay! It's all water underneath me. Come on, sir. Here I am."

A few more strokes of the oars ran us close in beneath the pendent boughs, and the next minute the carpenter caught hold of one of the overhanging branches and kept the boat there, while Pete descended from where he had climbed, to lower himself into the boat and sit down shivering and dripping.

"Thought he'd got me, sir," he said, looking white. "I dived down, though, and only come up once, but dove again so as to come up under the trees; and then I found a place where I could pull myself up. It was precious hard, though. I kep' 'specting one of 'em would pull me back, till I was up yonder; and it arn't safe there."

"Why not?" I said.

"There's great monkeys yonder, and the biggest snake I ever see, Master Nat."

"But did you not see the boat? Didn't you see us hunting for you?" said my uncle angrily.

"No, sir; I had all I could do to swim to one of the trees, diving down so as the 'gators shouldn't see me; and when I did get up into the tree, you'd gone back down the river, so that I couldn't see nothing of you."

"But why didn't you shout, Pete?" said the carpenter. "Everyone's been afraid you was drowned."

"Who was going to shout when there was a great snake curled up in knots like a ship's fender right over your head? Think I wanted to wake him up? Then there was two great monkeys."

"Great monkeys!" said my uncle. "Pray, how big were they?"

"Dunno, sir, but they looked a tidy size, and whenever I moved they begun to make faces and call me names."

"What did they call you, Pete?" I said.

"I dunno, Master Nat. You see, it was all furren, and I couldn't understand it; but one of 'em was horrid howdacious: he ran along a bough till he was right over my head, and then he took hold with his tail and swung himself to and fro and chattered, and said he'd drop on my head if I dared to move."

"Are you sure he said that, Pete?" said my uncle drily.

"Well, sir, I can't be quite sure, because I couldn't understand him; but it seemed something like that."

"Yes, but I'm afraid there was a good deal of imagination in it, Pete, and that you have bad eyes."

"Oh, no, sir," said Pete; "my eyes are all right."

"They cannot be," said my uncle; "they must magnify terribly. Now then, take off your wet clothes, wring them out, and hang them up in the sun, while we look after this huge serpent and the gigantic monkeys. Draw the boat along by the boughs, Cross, till we can look through that opening. Be ready with your gun, Nat. Put in a couple of those swanshot cartridges. You shall do the shooting."

I hurriedly changed the charges in my double gun and sat in my place, looking up eagerly, trying to pierce the green twilight and tangle of crossing boughs, while Pete slowly slipped off his dripping shirt and trousers, watching me the while.

"See anything yet?" said my uncle, as he helped Cross to push the boat along, pulling the boughs aside, which forced him to lower the sail and unship the mast.

"No, uncle; the boughs are too thick—yes—yes, I can see a monkey hanging by his tail."

"A six-footer? Bring him down, then. We must have his skin."

"Six-footer? No!" I said. "It's about as big as a fat baby."

"I thought so," said my uncle. "Never mind the poor little thing; look-out for the monstrous snake. I daresay it's one of the anacondas crept up out of the river. See it?"

"No, uncle; but there might be a dozen up there."

"Keep on looking. You must see it if it's as big as Pete here says. Was it close to the trunk, my lad?"

"Not very, sir; it was just out a little way, where the boughs spread out."

"I see it!" I cried. "Keep the boat quite still. It's curled up all in a knot."

"A hundred feet long?" said my uncle, laughing.

"Not quite, uncle."

"Well, fifty?"

"I don't think so, uncle."

"Five-and-twenty, then?"

"Oh, no," I said; "it's rather hard to tell, because of the way she folds double about; but I should think it's twelve feet long."

"I thought so," said my uncle. "Pete, you'll have to wear diminishing glasses."

"That aren't the one, sir," said Pete gruffly.

"Shall I shoot, uncle?"

"No; we don't want the skin, and it would be a very unpleasant task to take it off. Push off, Cross, and let's go up the stream. I want to get to clearer parts, where we can land and make some excursions."

Pete hung his head when I looked at him, but he said no more, and a couple of hours after, with his clothes thoroughly dry, he was helping to navigate the boat, rowing, poling, and managing the sail till night fell, when we once more moored to a great tree trunk, as we had made a practice all the way up, and slept in safety on board, with the strange noises of the forest all around.

Chapter Seven.

Snakes and Pumas.

It was a relief at last, after many days of hard work, sailing and rowing and poling over the shallows by means of the light bamboos we cut upon the banks, to find that we were well above the dense, jungle-like forest where, save in places, landing was impossible. Instead of creeping along between the two high walls of verdure, the river ran clear, shallow, and sparkling, among gravelly beds and rocks; while, though the growth was abundant on banks, there were plenty of open places full of sunshine and shadow, where flowers bloomed and birds far brighter in colour flitted from shrub to shrub, or darted in flocks among the trees. Mountains rose up in the distance, and every now and then we had glorious peeps of the valleys, which near at hand were of the richest golden-green, but in the distance gradually grew from amethyst into the purest blue.

"At last!" cried Uncle Dick, for we had reached the outskirts of the land he sought—one with the natural roads necessary; for by careful management we contrived to penetrate some distance up the various streams which came down from the mountains to join the main river, and when we had forced the boat up a little stream till it was aground, we there camped and made expeditions on foot in all directions, coming back to the boat with our treasures.

It was difficult to decide which stream to try, and one in particular whose mouth we passed several times in our journeys to and fro attracted me—I could not tell why—and I suggested more than once that we should go up it; but Uncle Dick shook his head.

"It is the least likely, Nat," he said on one occasion, and when, after several expeditions, I proposed it again, because most of those we tried evidently bore to the north, while this had a southward tendency, he refused tetchily.

"Can't you see how covered it is with water-weed and tangled growth? It would be impossible to go up there without a small canoe."

So I said no more, but contented myself with his choice.

For of treasures we had plenty, the wild mountain valleys swarming with beautifully plumaged birds, especially with those tiny little objects which were actually less than some of the butterflies and moths.

These humming-birds we generally shot with sand, sometimes merely with the wad of the cartridge, and even at times brought them down by the concussion caused by firing with powder only, when very near.

I was never tired of examining these little gems of the bird world, and wondering at their excessive beauty in their dazzling hues, exactly like those of the precious stones from which they are named—ruby, emerald, topaz, sapphire, amethyst, and the like.

"It caps me," Pete used to say, as he stared with open mouth when I carefully skinned the tiny creatures to preserve them.

Then came the day when, after a long tramp along with Pete, we found ourselves at the end of a narrow valley, with apparently no farther progress to be made.

We had started, after an early breakfast in the boat, and left my uncle there to finish off the drying of some skins ready for packing in a light case of split bamboo which the carpenter had made; and with one gun over my shoulder, a botanist's collecting-box for choice birds, and Pete following with another gun and a net for large birds slung over his shoulder, we had tramped on for hours, thinking nothing of the heat and the sun-rays which flashed off the surface of the clear shallow stream we were following, for the air came down fresh and invigorating from the mountains.

We had been fairly successful, for I had shot four rare humming-birds; but so far we had seen no specimens of the gorgeous quetzal, and it was for these that our eyes wandered whenever we reached a patch of woodland, but only to startle macaws, parrots, or the clumsy-looking—but really light and active—big-billed toucans, which made Pete shake his head.

"They're all very well, with their orange and red throats, or their pale primrose or white, Master Nat; but I don't see no good in birds having great bills like that."

We had a bit of an adventure, too, that was rather startling, as we slowly climbed higher in tracking the course of the little stream towards its source in the mountain. As we toiled on where the rocks rose like walls on either side, and the ground was stony and bare, the rugged glittering in the sunshine, Pete had got on a few yards ahead through my having paused to transfer a gorgeous golden-green beetle to our collecting-box.

I was just thinking that the absence of grass or flowers was probably due to the fact that the flooded stream must at times run all over where we were walking, the narrow valley looking quite like the bed of a river right up to the rocks on either side, when Pete shouted to me—

"Come and look, Master Nat. What's this here? Want to take it?"

I looked, and then fired the quickest shot I ever discharged in my life. I hardly know how I managed it; but one moment I was carrying my gun over my shoulder, the next I had let the barrels fall into my left hand and fired.

Pete leapt off the ground, uttering a yell which would have made anyone who could have looked on imagine that I had shot him. He dropped the gun he carried and turned round to face me.

"What did you do that for, Master Nat?" he cried.

"For that," I said, pointing, and then raising my piece to my shoulder, I fired again at something writhing and twining among the loose stones.

"Thought you meant to shoot me, sir," said Pete, picking up the gun and covering a dint he had made in the stock, as he stared down at the object that was now dying fast. "Well, it's of no good now. You've reg'larly spoiled it."

"Do you know what that is?" I said, with my heart beating fast.

"Course I do," he said with a laugh. "Snake."

"Yes, the most deadly snake out here. If I had waited till you touched it you would have been stung; and that generally means death."

"My word!" said Pete, shrinking away. "Think of it, sir! Shouldn't have liked that, Master Nat. What snake is it?"

"A rattlesnake."

"I didn't hear him rattle. But I was just going to lay hold of him behind his ears and pick him up."

"And yet uncle told you to beware of poisonous snakes."

"Ah! so he did, sir; but I wasn't thinking about what he said then. So that's his rattle at the end of his tail, with a sting in it."

"Nonsense!" I cried. "Rattlesnakes do not sting."

"Hark at him!" cried Pete, addressing nobody. Then to me—

"Why, you said just now they did."

"I meant bite."

"But wapses have their stings in their tails."

"But rattlesnakes do not," I said. "Look here."

I drew the hunting knife I carried, and with one chop took off the dangerous reptile's head. Then picking it up I opened the jaws and showed him the two keen, hollow, poisonous fangs which rose erect when the jaws gaped.

"Seem too little to do any harm, Master Nat," said Pete, rubbing his head. "Well, I shall know one of them gentlemen another time.—Oh, don't chuck it away!" he cried. "I should like to put that head in a box and save it."

"Too late, Pete," I said, for I had just sent the head flying into the rippling stream; and after reloading we went on again till it seemed as if we were quite shut in.

For right in front was a towering rock, quite perpendicular above a low archway, at whose foot the stream rushed gurgling out, while the sides of the narrow ravine in which we were rose up like a wall.

"We shall have to go back, Pete, I suppose," I said, as I looked upon either side.

"I wouldn't, sir," he replied; "it's early yet."

"But we couldn't climb up there."

"Oh, yes, we could, sir, if we took it a bit at a time."

Pete was right. I had looked at the task all at once, but by taking it a bit at a time we slowly climbed up and up till we reached to where there was a gentle slope dotted with patches of woodland, and looking more beautiful than the part we had travelled over that day.

It was just as we had drawn ourselves up on to the gentle slope which spread away evidently for miles, that Pete laid his hand upon my arm and pointed away to the left.

"Look!" he whispered; "thing like a great cat. There she goes."

But I did not look, for I had caught sight of a couple of birds gliding through the air as if they were finishing their flight and about to alight.

"Look there!" I panted excitedly, as I watched for the place where the birds would pitch, which proved to be out of sight, beyond a clump of trees.

"This way, Master Nat," whispered Pete.

"No, no; this way," I said hoarsely. And I hurried forward, having to get over about a hundred yards before I could reach the patch behind which the birds had disappeared.

My heart beat faster with excitement as well as exertion as I checked my pace on reaching the trees and began to creep softly along in their shelter, till all at once there was a harsh scream, followed by a dozen more, as a little flock of lovely green parroquets took flight, and Pete stopped short for me to fire.

But I did not; I only kept on, wondering whether the objects of my search would take fright.

They did the next moment, and I fired at what seemed like a couple of whirring patches of orange, one of which to my great joy fell, while the other went right away in a straight line, showing that it had not been touched.

"That's got him!" cried Pete excitedly. And he ran forward to pick up the bird, while I began to reload, but stopped in astonishment, for from some bushes away to the left, in a series of bounds, a magnificent puma sprang into sight, and seemed to be racing Pete so as to get first to the fallen bird.

Pete was nearest, and would have been there first, but he suddenly caught sight of the great active cat and stopped short.

This had the effect of making the puma stop short too, and stand lashing its tail and staring at Pete as if undecided what to do.

I ought to have behaved differently, but I was as much taken by surprise as Pete, and I, too, stood staring instead of reloading my gun, while it never once occurred to the lad that he had one already charged in his hand.

Suddenly, to my astonishment, he snatched off his straw hat.

"Shoo!" he cried, and sent it skimming through the air at the puma.

The effect was all he desired, for the beautiful animal sprang round and bounded away towards the nearest patch of forest, Pete after him till he reached his hat, which he picked up in triumph and stuck on his head again, grinning as he returned.

"That's the way to scare that sort, Master Nat," he cried. And he reached me again just as I stooped to pick up the fallen bird.

"Cock of the Rocks, Pete," I cried triumphantly, too much excited to think about the puma.

"Is he, sir?" said Pete. "Well, he ran away like a hen."

"No, no! I mean this bird. Isn't it a beauty?"

"He just is, sir. Lives on oranges, I s'pose, to make him that colour."

"I don't know what it lived on," I said as I regularly gloated over the lovely bird with its orange plumage and soft wheel-like crest of feathers from beak to nape. "This must go in your net, Pete; but you must carry it very carefully."

"I will, Master Nat. Going back now?"

"Back? No," I cried. "We must follow up that other one. I saw which way it flew. Uncle will be in ecstasies at our having found a place where they come."

"Will he, sir? Thought it was golden-green birds with long tails. Quizzals. That one's got hardly any tail at all."

"He wants these too," I said, closing the breech of my gun. "Come along."

"But how about that there big cat, sir? He's gone down that way."

"We must fire at it if it comes near again, or you must throw your hat," I said, laughing.

"All right, sir, you know. Only if he or she do turn savage, it might be awkward."

"I don't think they're dangerous animals, Pete," I said; "and we must have that other bird, and we may put up more. Here, I'll go first."

"Nay, play fair, Master Nat," said Pete; "let's go side by side."

"Yes, but a little way apart. Open out about thirty feet, and then let's go forward slowly. I think we shall find it among those trees yonder."

"The big cat, sir?" said Pete.

"No, no!" I cried; "the other bird, the cock of the rocks. Now then, forward."

A little flock of brightly-coloured finches flew up before we had gone a hundred yards, but I was so excited by the prospect of getting my prize's mate that these seemed of no account, and we went on, my intention being to fire at the cock of the rocks, and nothing else, unless the golden plumage of a quetzal flashed into sight.

In another five minutes we had forgotten all about the puma, for we were leaving the trees where it had disappeared away to our left, and we went on and on, starting birds again and again, till we had passed over a quarter of a mile and were pushing on amongst open clumps of bushes with patches of woodland here and there.

Pete was abreast of me with the other gun, and I was sweeping the ground before me in search of the orange plumage of the bird I sought, which might spring up at any time, when I had to pass round a pile of rugged stones half covered with herbage.

"Sort of place for snakes to bask," I said to myself, as I gave it a little wider berth, when all at once, to my surprise, up rose with a whirr not the bird I sought, but a little flock of seven or eight, and as I raised my gun to fire at the group of whizzing orange—*Thud!*

Something heavy had bounded from the pile of stone I had passed, to alight full upon my shoulders.

Bang, bang! went both barrels of my gun, and the next moment I was down, spread-eagle fashion, on my face, conscious of the fact that what was probably the puma's mate had bounded right upon me as I stooped forward to fire, and as I heard Pete utter a yell of horror, the beast's muzzle was pressed down on the back of my neck, and its hot breath stirred the roots of my hair.

Chapter Eight.

A Lucky Escape.

For a few minutes, or a few moments, I cannot tell which, I lay there half stunned.

Then I began to think that I should be torn to pieces and devoured, and my next vivid thought took the form of a question—Will it hurt much?

This set me wondering whether I was already badly injured, and as I had read that people who are seriously hurt do not feel pain at the time, I took it for granted that I was in a very sad state. But all the same I did not feel torn by the creature's claws, nor yet as if its teeth had been driven into the back of my neck, though I supposed that they had been. What I did feel was that the puma was heavy, soft, and very hot.

"Then I can't be hurt," I reasoned with myself at last, "or I should feel the pain now," and with this I began to think it was time to do something; but I hesitated about beginning, for I could make no use of my discharged gun.

There was my knife, though, if I could get it out from its sheath in my belt, and feeling that, if it were to come to a struggle, my empty hands would be no match for the puma's teeth and claws, I began to steal my fingers towards my belt.

I stopped directly, though, for at the first movement there was a deep shuddering growl at the nape of my neck, and it seemed to run down my spine and out at the tips of my fingers and toes. It was just as if the puma were saying—

"You just lie still, or I'll bite."

That must have been the meaning, for I lay quite still with the great heat drops tickling my face and running in the roots of my hair, while the puma crouched upon my back so that I could feel its shape exactly.

"What can I do?" I said to myself, and then I remembered the old story about the traveller and the bear—how he shammed death, and the bear left him. That was what I felt that I must do, and I lay perfectly still in the hope that the puma would leave me, though it seemed quite to approve of its couch, and lay close, breathing steadily, so that I felt the rise and fall of its breast against my back.

Just when I was beginning to feel faint with the heat and excitement, a thrill ran through me, for from somewhere close at hand, but invisible to me in the position I occupied, I heard Pete's voice—

"Oh, Master Nat, Master Nat! Are you killed?"

"No," I cried; but I said no more, for there was a savage growl, a snap, and I felt myself seized at the back of the neck and

shaken, but the puma had only seized the collar of my loose jacket, so that I was unhurt still.

"What shall I do, Master Nat?" cried Pete.

The puma loosed its hold of the collar of my jacket, and I felt it raise its head as if looking in the direction of Pete, and it growled fiercely again.

"Shoot, Pete, shoot!" I cried, feeling that at all risks I must speak.

The puma's teeth gripped my collar again, and I could feel its claws glide out of their sheaths like a cat's and press upon my shoulders, giving me a warning of what the beast could do.

But its attention was taken off directly by Pete's voice, and it raised its head again and growled at him as if daring him to approach and rob it of its prey.

For Pete cried in a despairing tone—

"I dursn't shoot, Master Nat, I dursn't shoot. I aren't clever with a gun, and I should hit you."

I knew this was quite true, and that under the circumstances I dared not have fired, so I lay perfectly still, trying to think out what to do, for the animal seemed determined not to leave me, and I began to grow giddy as well as faint.

Then I started, for there was a rustling of the grass and a sharp crack, as if Pete had trodden upon a dead twig.

The puma growled again furiously, and then as I started, seized my collar tight in its teeth and shook me, for the sharp report of the gun Pete carried rang out, followed by that of a second barrel, when I heard the loud whirr of wings, and felt sure that three or four more specimens of the lovely orange-tinted birds I sought had been scared into flight.

But the firing in the air had not scared the puma, which lowered its head again and seized my collar, clinging tightly, and working its claws in and out of their sheaths.

"It's no good, Master Nat," cried Pete; "it don't frighten him a bit. Shall I run back and tell the doctor?"

"No," I said softly, so as not to irritate the puma; "you could not get back till after dark, and I should be dead before then."

"What shall I do then, Master Nat? What shall I do? I want to save you, but I'm such a coward. I don't care, though; he shall have my knife into him if I die for it! Ah, I know!" he cried exultingly, "Whoo—hoo—oo—oo—oo!"

To my astonishment and delight, just as I was nearly fainting, the puma gave a furious growl and a tremendous bound, leaving me free, and as I struggled to my feet, panting and exhausted, I caught sight of Pete twenty yards away in the act of picking up his straw hat, with which he returned to me, grinning with delight.

"That done it," he cried. "He couldn't understand it a bit, I sent my old hat skimming at him, and I say, he did cut away. I say, you aren't much hurt, are you, sir?"

"N-no," I said hesitatingly, "I think not. Look at my neck and shoulder. See if they bleed."

"Yes," cried Pete excitedly, "he's got hold of you at the back o' the neck and ragged you. Where's your hanky?"

I turned deathly sick with horror as I drew out my handkerchief and gave it to him; and then I felt ashamed of myself, for Pete burst out laughing.

"He aren't touched your neck, Master Nat," he cried, "on'y got hold of the collar of your jacket and chawed it a bit. I say, who'd ha' thought an old straw hat was better than a gun!"

"Can we get some water?" I said hoarsely.

"Yes, there's some trickles down into a bit of a pool yonder, where I found my hat. Come on."

A few minutes later I was bathing my hands and face, after we had lain down and drunk heartily of the sweet, cool, clear water, to rise up refreshed, and as the puma had disappeared, feeling as if the danger through which we had passed was very far away.

"How d'yer feel now, Master Nat?" asked Pete.

"Oh, better; much better," I said quickly.

"Good job he didn't begin eating of you, ain't it, sir?"

"Yes, Pete, a very good job," I said heartily.

"Then let's go on and shoot some more of them yaller birds."

I shook my head as I held out one hand, which was trembling.

"I don't think I could hit a bird now, Pete, after that upset."

"Oh, yes, you could, sir," he cried. "Let's go on; and I say, if you see my gentleman again, you pepper him, and he won't come near us any more."

"I don't know, Pete," I said thoughtfully; "the pain might make it more vicious. Let's get back to the boat. I feel as if I've done quite enough for one day."

I finished reloading my gun as I spoke, so as to be ready for emergencies, and turned to retrace our steps to the rocky descent to the stream, when Pete touched my arm.

"Coming back here to drink," he whispered.

I forgot all about the shock and nervousness the next moment, as I saw the flutter of approaching wings, and directly after my gun rang out with two reports, while as the smoke floated away, Pete triumphantly ran to where a couple of the orange birds had fallen.

"I say, Master Nat," he said, "you can shoot. Wish I could do that. You seem just to hold the gun up and it's done. I knew you could. They are beauties. Something better worth taking back than we had before."

The birds' plumage was carefully smoothed, and without further adventure we reached the top of the vast rocky wall and descended to the stream, where we had another refreshing draught close to the mouth of the natural arch through which the water flowed, and then tramped back to the boat, reaching it at sundown, where my uncle was, as I had said, in ecstasies with the beautiful birds we had brought.

I was as pleased, but just then I thought more of the pleasant roast-bird supper and the coffee that awaited us, and paid more attention to these than anything else.

Over the supper, though, I related our experience with the pumas, and my uncle looked serious.

"You got off well, Nat," he said. "They are not dangerous beasts, though, unless attacked and hurt. I'd give them as wide a berth in future as I could. I'm thankful that you had such an escape."

Chapter Nine.

Through the Cavern.

My uncle accompanied me in my next and several other visits to the upper valley, with the result that we obtained as many specimens of the beautiful orange birds as we required, and in addition several rare kinds of humming-birds; but strangely enough, anxious as I was that my uncle should see one of the pumas they were never encountered once.

The whole of the upper valley was very lovely, and the air, from its being so high up among the mountains, deliciously cool.

"It seems a pity," my uncle said, "that nobody lives here." For as far as we could make out in our many journeys, human beings had never penetrated its solitudes.

"Yes," I said, on one of these occasions, "it is a glorious place, uncle, and anyone might make it a lovely garden with hardly any trouble; but I shouldn't like to live here after all."

"Why?" he said. "You seem very hard to please."

"The place isn't perfect, uncle," I said.

"No place is, but I don't see much to find fault with. Oh, you mean that we can find no quetzals."

"No, I did not," I said. "I meant we find too many rattlesnakes."

"Ah, yes, they are a nuisance, Nat; but they always get out of our way if they can, and so long as they don't bite us we need not complain. Well, we have pretty well explored this valley, and it is time we tried another. We must get farther to the south."

"Why not strike off, then, from the top of the great cliff above the arch, and try and find where the stream dives down?"

"What!" he said; "you don't think, then, that the stream rises entirely there?"

"No," I said; "I fancy it dives underground when it reaches a mountain, and comes out where we saw."

"Quite likely," he said, jumping at the idea. "We'll try, for we have had some beautiful specimens from the woodlands on the banks of that stream. Perhaps we may find my golden-green trogons up there after all, for I feel sure that there are some to be found up among the head-waters of the river."

The next day preparations were made for our expedition, and as the country we were in seemed to be so completely uninhabited from its unsuitability for agricultural purposes, and the little attraction it had for hunters other than such as we, there was no occasion to mind leaving the boat.

The carpenter and Pete were in high glee at the news that they were to accompany us, and in the intervals of packing up, their delight was expressed by furtive punches and slaps delivered when one or the other was not looking.

"I am glad, Mr Nat," Bill Cross said to me when we were alone for a few minutes overnight. "I'm not grumbling, sir, and I like making cases and cooking and washing, but I do feel sometimes as if I'd give anything to be able to shoulder a gun and come along with you gents, shooting and hunting for curiosities."

"Well, you'll have a fine chance now, Bill," I said.

"Yes, sir, and it'll just be a treat; for I haven't had much of the fun so far, have I?"

"Fun?" I said.

"Yes, sir; it's fun to a chap like me who when he goes to sleep of a night it's with the feeling that there's a day's work done."

"So it is with all of us," I said. "I work very hard; so does my uncle."

"Yes, sir; but don't you see that what's work to you as can go and do is seems like play to me as is obliged to stay in camp—I mean with the boat. But as I was going to say, after a night's

rest when one wakes up it's always to begin another day's work! But there, don't you think I'm grumbling, sir, because I arn't; for I've never been so happy in my life before as since I've been out here with you and the doctor. What time do we start to-morrow?"

"Breakfast before daylight, and start as soon as we can see," I replied.

"Right, sir; I'll be ready."

There was so little novelty in a fresh trip to me then, that I dropped asleep as soon as I lay down in the tent under a big tree ashore, and it seemed like the next minute when the carpenter in his gruff voice called to us that breakfast was nigh ready.

I looked up, to see his face by the lanthorn he had brought alight, as he hung it from a hook on the tent-pole; and then after making sure that my uncle was awake, I hurried out into the darkness, where Pete was busy frizzling bacon over the glowing embers, ran down into the fresh, cool water for my bath, and came out with my blood seeming to dance through my veins.

Our breakfast was soon dispatched, and before the sun rose the tent had been fastened up, our guns and satchels shouldered and swung, and in addition Cross carried a coil of rope and the lanthorn, now out and freshly trimmed.

"Be useful," he said, with a sage nod of the head. "S'pose we shall be out all night."

The next minute he and Pete shouldered the extra guns and the packs they were to carry in case our trip lasted over more than a couple of days; and we set off in single file steadily up the side of the stream between the walls of rock, and sometimes wading across it to find better ground. Twice over we waded in the middle of the water, where it was sandy, and found it nowhere over our knees.

In due time we reached the spot where the walls of the gorge had drawn together and the end was closed by the perpendicular mountain at whose foot was the little natural arch out of which the water came gurgling swiftly. Here my uncle stopped for the load-bearers to have a short rest before we began to climb upward to Puma Vale, as I had dubbed it.

Pete and Cross used their loads as seats, and the latter, who had not seen the place before, sat looking about attentively, while my uncle took out his little double-glass and examined the towering mountain for signs of birds upon the ledges or trees which clung to the sides.

The carpenter turned to me and nodded.

"Strange pretty place, Mr Nat," he cried, "and it's just like Pete said it was. Going up yonder to try and find the river again farther on, aren't we?"

"Yes, and I think we shall find it."

"Wouldn't it be better to keep on up it? Should be sure of it then."

"But don't you see that we can go no farther?" I said wonderingly.

"No, sir, I don't. Water's not above eighteen inches deep, and it's nice sandy bottom."

"But it nearly touches the top of the arch," I said.

"Just there it do, sir, but that's only the doorway; it may be ever so high inside. P'raps I'm wrong, though. You've tried it, then?"

"What, tried to get under that horrible dark arch? Oh, no!"

"Why not?" said the man coolly. "I don't see nothing horrid. Dessay it'll be dark, but we've a lanthorn."

"But we should have to wade, and in the darkness we might go down some horrible hole."

Cross shook his head.

"Nay," he said; "you might do that if the water was running the other way downward, but we should have to go up stream with the water coming to us. We shouldn't find any holes; what we should find more likely would be waterfalls, and have to climb up 'em."

"What's that?" cried my uncle, who had caught part of what was said, and he was told the rest.

"Let's have a look, Nat," he said, and slipping off our boots and stockings we waded on over the soft sand to where the water came rushing out through the arch, stooping down and peering in as we listened to the gurgling and whispering of the water.

"Shall we have the lanthorn, and I'll stoop down and see if the roof gets higher farther in?" I said.

"Would you mind doing it?" said my uncle.

"I don't think I should like it much," I said; "but I'll try."

"Let me go, Master Nat, sir," said Pete eagerly; "I won't mind."

"Sounds as if there's plenty of room inside, sir," said Cross, who had followed our example and waded in.

"Let's see," said my uncle, stooping down, after cocking his gun. Then holding it as if it were a pistol, he reached in as far as he could and fired both barrels.

The reports sounded dull and smothered, and as we listened my uncle said:

"It is only a narrow passage, I think."

Then he was silent, for the reports were repeated ten times as loudly, and went on reverberating again and again, from farther and farther away, till they gradually grew indistinct and strange, for there was a strange dull roar growing louder and louder till the echoes were drowned, while the roar seemed to come on and on, till without hesitation on anyone's part we turned and ran splashing out of the stream to the shore, to escape from a dark rushing cloud which came streaming out of the mouth of the cave with screams, hisses, and whisperings, out and away down the narrow ravine till it seemed to be filled with birds and bats, while a strange black-beetly odour assailed our nostrils.

"No doubt about there being plenty of room, lads," said my uncle, as he laughed at our scared faces, for the sudden rush out was startling.

"Is them owls, sir?" said the carpenter, staring.

"No, no," replied my uncle; "they are something of the goat-sucker tribe—night-birds which build in caves; but a good half of what we see are bats."

"Yes, I can see they're bats, sir, and the biggest I ever did see. Well, they won't hurt us, sir?"

"No, but they're terribly afraid we shall hurt them," said my uncle. "Well, Nat, what do you say? Shall we explore the underground river?"

I felt as if I should like to say, "No, I would rather not," but the pride within me made me take the other view of the matter.

"Yes," I said, "of course," and the sense of unwillingness was forgotten in the desire to laugh at the look of horror in Pete's face as he stared appealingly from one to the other.

"You won't mind, Cross?" said my uncle.

"No, sir; I should like it," replied the man.

"Light the lanthorn."

"Shall we take our loads with us, uncle?" I said.

"Certainly. If the way through is short we shall want them at the other side. If it is long we shall want some refreshments on the way."

"But suppose—" I began, and then I stopped.

"Suppose what?" said my uncle.

"Suppose the river does not pass through the mountain, but comes from deep down somewhere."

"The more interesting the discovery of its hidden source, my lad. But that is not likely. Look at the rock. What is it—granite or gneiss?"

"No," I said; "limestone."

"Well, you ought to know how limestone ridges are honeycombed with water-formed caverns. We have several examples at home. If this subterranean river came bubbling up from somewhere in the interior and the rock were granite, I should expect it to be hot."

"And it's quite cold, sir," said Cross.

"Oh, no, just pleasantly cool. I don't think there's a doubt about its having its source higher up in the mountains; but whether it has dived down for a few hundred yards or a few miles we can only know by exploring."

"Well, Cross," I said to the carpenter, "will this be fun enough for you?"

"Splendid, sir," said the man enthusiastically. "I never had a treat like this."

"Master Nat," whispered Pete, "am I to come too?"

"Of course," I said. "Tuck up your trousers as high as you can."

"But suppose we have to swim, sir?"

"Look here, Pete," I said, "you don't want to come."

"No, sir. Can't help it, sir, but I never could a-bear the dark."

"Then I'll ask my uncle to let you stop behind."

"What!" cried the poor fellow fiercely, "leave me behind, and you go? That you just won't, sir. I'd go if it was twice as dark."

I saw him set his teeth, and then, as my uncle gave the word, he climbed up to a verdant cleft with Cross to cut four stout bamboos about six feet long to act as walking-staves.

"We must always be ready to feel our way and try the depth," said Uncle Dick; "and avoid any holes. If it grows deeper as we go on and there is no bare rock at the sides, of course we must return."

A few minutes later our guns were slung across our backs, the loads taken up, and, each armed with a staff, we made our start—Cross, as he held the lanthorn, asking leave to lead the way.

"We shan't be able to do it, Master Nat," whispered Pete, as we followed in turn, Pete last, for it was very hard work, the barrels of our guns scraping again and again against the roof during the first twenty yards or so; but Pete had hardly uttered the above words before I saw Cross raise the lanthorn higher. Then my uncle began to walk erect, and directly after I found on raising my staff that I could not touch the roof, while a sharp whistle uttered by our lanthorn-bearer was echoed from far on high.

"Plenty of room upwards, sir," cried Cross.

"Yes," said my uncle.

"Ugh! what a horrid place, Master Nat!" whispered Pete, who kept as close to me as he could. "Do mind, sir."

"Mind what?" I said.

"The holes. If you step into one of them there's no knowing how deep they are. They must be just like wells."

"How do you know?" I said gruffly; and he was silent, giving me time to look to right and left and forward, as far as the light of the lanthorn would allow.

There was not much to see—only a faint halo of light, with reflections sometimes from dripping rocks; but it seemed that there was no shore to the river on either side such as would afford footing, while as far as I could make out the stream was about the same width as it was outside.

There was the dancing light on ahead, playing strangely on the surface of the gliding waters, and all around black darkness, while the vast cavern in which we were, seemed to be filled with strange sounds, splashings, ripplings, whisperings, and their echoes.

"Hear that, Master Nat?" said Pete, getting close beside me and grasping my arm.

"Of course I can," I said pettishly, for it was bad enough to suffer from one's own feelings, without being troubled at such a time by others.

"But—oh, there it goes again," he whispered.

"What goes again?" I said.

"That, sir. I dunno what it is, but there seems to be lots of 'em. Bill Cross stirs 'em up with the stick and the light, and they swims off both sides, and then you can hear 'em splashing with their tails as they come back again."

"Nonsense!" I said. "That's all imagination."

"Oh, no, it aren't, sir," he whispered. "I say, what did you say was the name of them big snakes that lives part of their time in the water?"

"Anacondas."

"That's them, sir. We've got all amongst 'em here, and they'll be having one of us directly."

"Pooh! There's nothing alive in this dark place," I said scornfully.

"What! Why, wasn't it alive with birds and bats?"

"Oh, yes, but I don't believe there's a fish in these dark waters."

"Fish! Oh, I don't mind fish, sir, as long as they aren't sharks. It's them conders I can't bear. It wouldn't so much matter if we were in the dark, but we've brought a light to show 'em where we are."

"There are no snakes here," I said angrily.

"It's all very well for you to say so, Master Nat," he replied; "but you just listen. There! Hear that?"

"Yes, the splash against the side of the wave we make in wading."

Pete was about to say something more, but just then my uncle turned his head.

"Use your bamboo well, Nat," he said, "in case of there being any cracks; but the bottom seems very level, and the depth keeps about the same. Nice and cool here. Keep close up. What's that, Cross?"

"Only a stone standing right up, sir; water washes round it. It's best to keep right in the middle, I think."

"You must judge about that," said my uncle. "Go on."

"How far do you think we've come, sir, now?"

"About a quarter of a mile, I should say."

"That's what I thought, sir," said the carpenter, and he waded steadily on, with us following.

After a time it grew very monotonous, but we persevered, finding the underground river sometimes a little deeper, then shallower, so that the water rippled just above our ankles, while we knew at times that the cavern was wide and high, at others that it closed in on either side, and twice over the roof was so close that I could touch it with my stick.

The times when it opened out were plain enough, for our splashings or voices echoed and went whispering far away. But otherwise the journey was very tame, and as the feeling of awe died away, the journey seemed uncommonly free from danger, for I felt it was absurd to imagine the waters to be peopled with strange creatures.

We had been wading on for quite a couple of hours, when the water began to grow more sluggish, and to flow very quietly, rising, too, higher and higher, till it was above our waists, and the light reflected from the surface showed that it was very smooth.

"Keep on, sir?" said Cross.

"Yes," said my uncle. "Keep on till it nearly touches your chin. Then we'll turn back."

Pete uttered a low groan, but followed in a despairing way, while we went on for another quarter of an hour, with the water deeper and deeper, and at last, to our great delight, my uncle said:

"There, the water is rippling up in my beard, so it is time to go back."

"Hah!" ejaculated Pete, and then he groaned, for Cross said:

"Not so deep now as it was ten minutes ago, sir."

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, sir. I know by my stick. I keep my hand so that it touches the water, and I've had to move it twice in the last five minutes. It's not so deep now by three inches."

"Go on, then," said my uncle, and we followed, to find the water getting shallower rapidly now. Ten minutes later it was below my waist, and in another ten minutes not above mid-thigh; but it had evidently widened out, for our voices seemed to go off far away into the distance, and my uncle suddenly said:

"Why, Nat, the river must have widened out into a regular lake. How shall we find the place where it narrows again?"

"Foller that there sound, sir, I think," said Cross.

"What sound?" I said.

"That, sir; listen. I can hear where it seems to be rushing in ever so far away."

"Yes, I can hear it now," I said.

"Forward, then," said my uncle, and with the water once more but little above our knees we waded steadily on after the light which Cross bore breast-high.

"Cheer up, Pete," I said; "we must be getting on now. Why, if it came to the worst we could turn back."

"Never find the way, sir," he said bitterly, and then he uttered a yell, closely following upon a sharp ejaculation from the carpenter, who suddenly placed his foot in some cavity of the smooth floor, fell forward with an echoing splash, and the next moment the lanthorn disappeared beneath the gleaming surface, leaving us in utter darkness.

Wash, wash, ripple, ripple went the water, and the cries whispered away as fading echoes, and then Pete's voice rose in a piteous wail.

"I knowed it, I knowed it," he said. "We shall never see the light again. Oh, help, Master Nat, help! Here's one of them water-conders got me by the leg to pull me down."

A cry that went to my heart and sent a shudder through every nerve, for the darkness seemed so thick that it might be felt.

Chapter Ten.

Into the Sunlight again.

There was a loud splashing noise, another cry, and the gurgling made by someone being dragged under water; and then, just as I felt that the horror was greater than I could bear, the carpenter cried:

"What's the matter with you? Don't make a row like that."

"I—I felt something ketch hold of me and pulling me down."

"Something! Do you call me something?" growled the carpenter. "Of course I caught hold of you. You'd catch hold if you tumbled as I did. Bad job about the light, master."

"Yes, a very bad job," said my uncle's voice out of the darkness. "How was it?"

"Stepped down into some hole, sir. Felt myself going right into a crack-like sort o' place."

"All stand still, then," cried my uncle, "while I strike a match. Where's the lanthorn?"

"Oh, I've got that fast, sir; but you won't get the wick to light, I'm afraid, now."

"Here, stop!" I cried, as a sudden feeling of delight shot through me. "I can see daylight yonder."

"Bravo! Well done, Nat!" cried my uncle. "It's a long way off, but there's a faint gleam yonder in the direction from which that sound of falling water comes. Let me lead now, Cross. I think I can manage without a light."

"Better feel about well, sir, with your stick," said the carpenter. "That hole I trod in was rather awkward."

"I'll mind," said my uncle; "follow me close," and he began to wade in the direction of the faint gleam of light.

"Did you get wet, Pete?" I said.

"Wet, sir? He pulled me right under water. It's buzzing in my ears now."

"Better than being pulled under by a water-snake, Pete," I said, and he gave a shivering shudder as we followed on without either coming across the hole, and at the end of a quarter of an hour the light ahead was rapidly growing plainer, while the roar of falling water became louder and echoed through the vast cavern over whose watery floor we progressed.

In another half-hour's slow wading, we were able to make out our position, one which now became more striking minute by

minute, for we could see that we were in a vast chasm whose bottom was the rushing foaming river along which we were wading. It was some fifty feet wide, and the roof overhead nearly as much, while right in front, at the distance of a couple of hundred yards, and facing us as it now sent ever-changing flashes and reflections of light into the cavern, was the great fall whose waters thundered as they dived from somewhere out of sight into a huge basin whose overflowings formed the underground river along which we journeyed.

The scene became more beautiful minute by minute, the noise more deafening; and at last we stopped short, warned by the increasing depth of the water, and the sight of the great pool into which the cascade thundered down.

We were standing in the beautiful green twilight water to the middle, but no one for a time wished to stir, the scene was so grand, made more beautiful as it was from time to time by a gleam of sunshine shooting down across the faint mist of spray which floated upwards, and wherever this bright light fell we had glimpses of what seemed like fragments of a broken rainbow.

"Very beautiful, Nat," said my uncle at last, "but the floor here is rather damp; I am tired and hungry; and we have to get out. Which way shall we try?"

"Not go back, uncle," I said quickly. "Let's get into the sunshine again."

"Certainly; but how? We can't wade any farther without risk of drowning. What do you say, Cross?"

"Yonder's an awful pit, sir," said the carpenter.

"I could climb over the stones at the side there," said Pete suddenly.

"Well, I think it possible," said my uncle. "But where's that rope?"

"I've got it here, sir, round me," said Pete.

"Well, we'll make one end fast round you, and pay out the line as you climb, so that we can haul you in if you fall into the deep water. Will you try?"

"Oh, yes, sir; I'll try," cried Pete.

We made for the side, to find it slightly shallower, and after knotting the rope round his waist, Pete was started up the rocks, which proved, in spite of their threatening appearance much less difficult than we had anticipated, so that in a few minutes the lad had climbed to the level of the top of the falls, where he stood on a broad shelf, and by the help of the rope hauled up our baskets and satchels.

This done, Pete threw the rope down to us, then it was made fast to my waist and I began to climb, Pete hauling in the slack as I advanced, finding the way giddy but easy to climb. The danger was a slip upon the mossy rocks, wet with the fine spray which rose from the awful watery pit below.

But the touch of the rope gave confidence, and in a few minutes I was by Pete's side, ready to throw down the rope to Cross, who came up with the sure-footedness of a sailor. Then the packs were hauled up, and my uncle followed.

Our task was not yet done, for we had to take to the river again, just beyond the edge of the fall, a hundred feet above where we had waded before, and found ourselves in a narrow gorge with almost perpendicular sides covered with tree, bush, creeper, and wonderful ferns, all made glorious by the sunshine and blue sky.

The water was shallow, and we made fair progress, always looking the while for some way out of the gorge, whose beauties tempted us to linger, for we were once more among flowers, insects, and birds, one of the first of which sailed slowly overhead and across the gorge—an eagle with widespread pinions.

"Out of shot," said my uncle, as we stood knee-deep watching the large bird till it floated right out of sight.

"And not the sort of specimen we want, if it were in, uncle," I said.

"Quite right, Nat. Look yonder at the finches and those lovely blue creepers; but they're not what we want."

"No, uncle," I said; "I'm looking for what we do want. Ought not the quetzals to be found in a place like this?"

"We are in their region, Nat," he replied, "and that is all I can say. We know so little about them, the skins having been

mostly supplied by the Indians. But these rocks and patches of timber ought to be their home."

"There's a place, sir, where we might climb up out of this hollow," said Cross just then, and he pointed to a mere gash in the rocks, down which a tiny rivulet trickled.

It proved to be passable, and at the end of another quarter of an hour we were upon fairly level ground, open, and in the full sunshine, ready to rest, bask, dry our clothes, and sit down to what seemed to me the most delicious meal I had ever eaten.

In spite of the length of time which we had apparently spent in the darkness, it was still early in the day, and it was not long, after a good rest upon a hot rock in the sunny glow, before the two sufferers from their plunge were able once more to go about in quite dry clothes.

By this time we had made use of pocket compass and glass, taking bearings, so to speak, and pretty well made out our position to be only a few miles to the south and west of Puma Valley, while my uncle was in ecstasies with the promising appearance of the district, for as a collecting ground we had mountain, forest, plain, valley, and the lovely river-gorge waiting to be farther explored.

"If the quetzals are to be found, Nat," said my uncle, "we ought to see them here."

"What about going back, uncle?" I said, interrupting him.

"Back!" he cried. "What, are you tired already?"

"No, I was thinking about the possibility of getting up the tent and some more stores so as to be able to thoroughly explore these higher grounds."

"Yes," he said; "that's what we must do. I fancy we can make our way back without going through that hole again; but it was well worth the trouble, since it led us to this lovely ravine."

"Pst!" I whispered; "Pete sees something. He is making signs. Look, he is signing to those trees."

We seized our guns and advanced cautiously in the direction pointed out, separating so as to cover all the ground, in the full expectation of seeing some rare bird or another take flight. But

we met on the other side of the cluster of trees indicated, after having passed right through without a sign.

"Gone on to the next patch, uncle," I whispered; and we went on again, carrying out the same plans; and a finch or two took flight, but nothing more.

Again we went on, and tried a third little clump, but with no better fortune, and we stopped and looked at each other.

"Whatever it was, it is too cunning for us, Nat," said my uncle, "so we may as well give it up, for we could go on like this till dark."

"Yes," I said, with a sigh, "and it's hot and tiring work."

"Never mind; let's go back now," he said. "We don't even know what it was the lad saw."

We began to retrace our steps, keeping a sharp look-out, but seeing nothing but some active lizards sunning themselves among the rocks, and a rattlesnake, which we carefully left at rest; but before we were half-way back to where we had left our companions we came upon them with the spare guns.

"Haven't you shot it, sir?" asked Pete, staring hard at my uncle.

"No, we have not even seen it, whatever it is," said my uncle, smiling.

"Wonderful handsome bird, sir, with long blue and green and red and yellow feathers in its tail."

"Macaw—Ara," said my uncle; "flying across from tree to tree?"

"Yes, sir, I daresay it was," said Pete; "but it wasn't flying; it was on the ground, and when we saw it, in it went among the bushes quite slowly, didn't it, Bill?"

"You said it did, my lad," replied Cross. "I didn't see it."

"Long green, blue, red, and yellow feathers in its tail?" said my uncle.

"Yes, sir; that's it," looking up.

"And on the ground?"

"Yes, sir."

"Running?"

"Oh, no, sir, it was just creeping quietly along when I beckoned you."

"I don't know any bird answering your description but a macaw," said my uncle. "How big was it?"

"As big as a barn-door cock, sir, I think."

"Look here, Pete; you've seen macaws, or aras, as they call them. Mr Nat here shot one days ago."

"Them big poll parrots, sir? Oh no, it warn't one of them, sir. I know that sort well enough."

"I hope we shall come upon it another day then," said my uncle.

We had a short rest, and then turned in the direction of the river-gorge again, its presence simplifying our position, for we had only to steer south at any time to come upon the steep, well-wooded ravine, along whose sides we had constant peeps of the clear flowing water, finding several places where we could descend, while here the variety of birds, insects, and reptiles was wonderful, and had we wanted them we could soon have killed more than we should have been able to preserve.

But with most of them my uncle was familiar, and unless the specimen seen was something rare, he let it go in peace.

"Fortune may favour us, Nat," he said, "and we may come upon the home of the beautiful trogons, especially the splendid trogon, or quetzal. Then we must make the best of our opportunities."

I had expected that we should make our way back to the boat-camp that night, but we spent so much time exploring the wonders and beauties of the gorge, that evening was coming on when we stopped about a mile higher along the stream than the spot where we first climbed up, and as we were well supplied with provisions, and were pretty well fagged, my uncle decided to camp in the shelter of the rocky side of the ravine for the night.

So Pete was set to collect dead wood for a fire, Cross descended with our kettle to fill it below, and before long we were

partaking of a capital meat-tea by the light of the fire; while we strolled a little way from our camp to listen to the various sounds of the night, it seemed as if a fresh world of inhabitants had awakened, and for hours we listened to the strange notes of bird and insect, and watched with wonder the beauty of the fire-flies, which never seemed to grow common.

The fire was burning low when we turned back to camp, and Pete was stretched out on the sandy shelf beneath the great tree he had selected for our resting-place, and snoring as if he meant to make up for the hard day's work.

But Cross was wakeful and ready to throw a few more dry twigs upon the fire to light us as soon as he heard our steps.

"Seen or heard anything, Cross?" I said.

"Crickets, and toads, and frogs, and chuckling birds who seem to think we must be foolish to come right out here into no-man's-land, sir. That's about all. How have you got on?"

"Had a lovely walk," I said, as I settled down in my place beneath the sheltering boughs. "Good-night, uncle; good-night, everybody," and I believe that in ten minutes' time I was sleeping as soundly as if secure and well housed in a civilised land.

Chapter Eleven.

We Lose the Axe.

"Well, you can't help liking the place, Master Nat," said Pete the next morning, as we prepared the breakfast, "even if you do have to sleep on the sand with a nubbly stone under your back. Look at it; makes me feel as if I should like to be a savage Indian chief, and always live here shooting and fishing."

"It is lovely," I said, as I gazed around at the glorious scene.

"Why, you could get more birds here than you'll ever want. I think we ought to stay here instead of going away."

"We're only going to fetch up more stores and the tent, Pete. We must bring an axe, too, and make a shed."

"Then we're coming back?"

"Yes."

"Oh, that's all right, then, Master Nat. I did think it a pity to run away again as soon as we'd found this place."

The sun was only just up when after a good breakfast we started to find our way back to the entrance of the cave where we had set off upon our dark journey; and, taking a course which he had marked out from the high ground, my uncle led the way so well that by afternoon we struck the stream again, not by the mouth of the cavern, but miles below it, so that as soon as we could find a way down to its bank we retraced our way, and reached the anchored and well-moored boat long before dark.

Our task now was simple. The loads we were to take up the mountain-gorge were prepared, and next morning, heavily laden, we started with the intention of staying in the neighbourhood of the upper river for a week certain.

It was a hard task, laden as we were, but we managed to reach the camping-place with our heavy loads just at nightfall, one and all completely done up, and content to eat a morsel of food before lying down to sleep at once.

"It's very fortunate for us that the country is quite uninhabited," I remember thinking, as I lay down and revelled in the restful sensation afforded by the soft dry sand, part of a heap which had crumbled from the side of the ravine in the course of ages.

I remember no more till I was awakened by Pete, who announced breakfast, and I stared confusedly in the light of the early dawn at the bright fire, and wondered where I was.

That morning the tent was set up, and a rough shed was cleverly made by Cross, who seemed to glory in showing us how easily he could contrive a good shelter in case we should be overtaken by a tropical storm.

He selected a spot where the rock was out of the perpendicular, hanging over to some extent, and here he soon had four young straight trees set up, held in place by cross-pieces. Then rafters of bamboo were bound in position with the strong creepers which abounded, and this done, he began thatching, first with green boughs, then with a layer of palm-like leaves, which he made to overlap, and a strong reedy grass, that grew

abundantly in a low moist place by the river, was bound on in bundles for a finish.

"Capital," said my uncle; "but too much like stopping for months, when it is hardly likely we shall stay two weeks."

"May as well be comfortable, sir, while we are here," said Cross, smiling. "Keep the sun off, if we don't have rain."

That night we had everything shipshape, and retired early to rest, to enjoy a delicious sleep, which only seemed to last ten minutes before I opened my eyes to find it was morning once more, and I lay wondering what it was that Cross had lost, for it seemed to me in my half-wakeful state that I heard him say:

"Well, no more bones about it; you had it last, and you must find it."

I could not speak till I had made an effort and sat up, and then I was wakeful enough for the words to come.

"What have you lost?" I asked.

"My axe, sir, and I can't get along without that. It's a whole bag of tools to me. Pete had it last thing to chop some wood, and he says he laid it down inside the hut; but it aren't here now, and he's got to find it."

"I can't find it, Master Nat," said Pete dolefully; "he must have took it away and laid it somewhere else himself. Seems such a pity, it do."

"What, to take the axe?" I said.

"Nay—I meant to have a bother about that, and spoiling the holiday. I know the best way to find a thing like that," he added triumphantly.

"How?" I asked.

"Don't look for it, and then you're sure to find it when you least expect."

But the axe was not found then, and it was soon forgotten, for we were too busy searching the sides of the wonderful gorge, going day after day for miles on one side exploring the nooks and crannies, and another day wading across the river to explore the other side.

But though we discovered and shot numbers of the most beautiful birds, many of them quite new to both, we saw no sign of those we sought, and at last my uncle had decided that we must move a few miles higher, when a discovery was made which sent a thrill of hopefulness through us, and we began exploring and shooting more eagerly than ever, devoting each morning to the task and the evenings to skinning and preserving, till our selection of beautiful skins began to grow to an extent far greater than we had intended.

Meanwhile we had been living a gloriously free and happy life; expeditions had been made twice to the boat for more necessities, which were supplemented by an abundant supply of birds and fishes, the upper waters being so full of the latter that it was an easy task of a morning for Pete and me to catch enough for a meal.

But we had a few unpleasant experiences. Twice over we found that rattlesnakes had been attracted by the fire and had taken possession of quarters in our tent, for which, as they viciously showed fight, they were condemned to death and executed.

One morning, too, on waking, I caught sight of peculiar marks on the loose dry sand, a smooth deep furrow having been made, to which I drew my uncle's attention.

"We ought to hunt out the creature which made that, Nat," said my uncle. "Rather an unpleasant neighbour to have. Why, the fellow that marked that trail must be a good eighteen feet long."

It, too, suffered for its temerity, for it came again, and was seen by Pete on awaking in the morning, when he cautiously drew my attention to the monster's presence near the fire.

The next minute a couple of shots from my double gun rang out, and the huge serpent was writhing and twining among the bushes, and beating them flat by blows from its powerful tail.

Cross skinned it when it was dead, saying that he must have it for a curiosity if we did not, and probably it stretched a little in the process, for it proved to be a python, twenty feet in length and enormously thick.

It was the very next day when we were about to move, the visit of the python and the possibility of one from its mate having decided our immediate change, after a final tramp round in search of the birds we wanted.

But we had no more luck than usual. We could have shot plenty of specimens, but not those we sought, and we were nearing our camp when all at once what I took to be a pigeon dashed out of a tree, and meaning it for a roast, my gun flew to my shoulder, I fired hastily, and the bird fell.

"Uncle!" I cried, as I picked it out dead from among a clump of ferns.

"A quetzal!" shouted my uncle excitedly, for it was a scarlet-breasted bird, with back and wing, coverts of a glorious golden-green.

"But you said that they had tails three or four feet long."

"Yes," said my uncle; "the kind I want to find have, while this is only short; but here is proof that we are working in the right direction."

"Then we must stop here, uncle," I cried.

"Yes, Nat, it would be madness to leave. We must wait till the right ones come."

That bird's wonderfully oily and tender skin was carefully stripped off in the evening, and it had a drying box all to itself, one made expressly by Cross, who confided to me that it was the finest bird he had ever seen.

"Some of they humming-birds is handsome enough," he said, "but there's nothing of 'em. This one's grand. Now, if I could only find that there chopper as Pete lost—"

"Didn't lose it," growled Pete.

"—I should be," continued the carpenter, severely, "a happy man. Aren't you, sir?"

"No," I said; "nor shall be till I shoot some with tails three feet long."

The finding of this specimen completely, as I have said, changed our plans.

"It would be folly to go away now, Nat," repeated my uncle, "for at any moment we may find quite a flock."

This was one afternoon, when we had returned after an unsuccessful hunt, to take out our treasure and gloat over its wonderful plumage.

"Yes," I said; "but it's very tiresome, all this failure. Perhaps this is the only one for hundreds of miles."

"Nonsense!" cried my uncle. "I daresay, if the truth were known, we pass scores of them every day, sitting after the fashion of these trogons, perfectly still like a ball of feathers, watching us, and with their green plumage so like that of the leaves that we might go by hundreds of times and not see them."

"Oh!" I cried, "we could not pass one of them. The sun would make those beautiful golden-green wing coverts flash again."

"In the sunshine, my boy, but they rest in the deep shade. We shall come upon them yet, and find out their habits. Then all will be easy. Anyone searching for birds of paradise in New Guinea might go scores of times without success, and come away and say there are none. Just as it is in Australia: at one time of year flocks of the great white and sulphur cockatoos can be found; at another time you may search the same district for months and not see one."

"Yes, uncle," I said wearily, for I was tired after a long walk in the hot sun pestered by flies; "and I suppose there are plenty of birds about here that we have not seen. Why, of course, we haven't seen Pete's wonderful specimen yet."

"No," said my uncle drily, "and I shall be very much surprised if we ever do."

"Do you think there is nothing of the kind, then?" I said.

"I don't like to be positive, but I should say that he made that bird out of his own head."

"Oh, I don't think so, uncle," I replied; "Pete's very honest and straightforward."

"Yes, but he lets his brain run riot, Nat. He saw some bird, I do not doubt, but not clothed and ornamented as he says."

"There are birds with brightly-coloured tails such as he said?"

"Are there?" said my uncle drily. "I think not. If there be I should like a specimen; it would be an exciting display for the learned bird-lovers in London to gaze at. Don't you see, my boy, he furnished the specimen he saw with the tail plumage of three different varieties of the macaw—the green the blue, and the red. Pete's eyes played tricks with him that time. I wish he would see the long floating feathers of a quetzal flashing its green and gold and purple in the sunshine."

"So do I, uncle," I replied. "I wish we could find and shoot dozens of them, but I don't long for the task of skinning them; they are so delicate and likely to tear."

"Like all the birds related to the cuckoos," said my uncle; "but we were very successful over this. By the way, Pete is getting very handy in that way. We must trust him with some of the commoner things, for it seems as if after all we shall have to fill up with the best of the less-known birds."

"Oh, no," I said, as I carefully smoothed down the loose silky plumage of our solitary specimen. "We're tired now. When we have had a good wash and our tea-dinner we shall feel different."

I carefully put away the trogon, and crossed to where Pete was busy getting the kettle to boil, and making other preparations for our evening meal. No light task, for his fire troubled him a good deal, and he began about it at once.

"What I want, Master Nat," he said, "is some regular good stiff clay to make up into bricks. They'd bake hard. As for these stones I build up a fireplace and oven with, some go bang and fly off in splinters, and the other sort moulders all away into dust—regular lime, you know, that fizzles and cisses when it's cold and you pour water over it, and then comes hot again."

"Try some of those pieces out of the river bed."

"I have, sir, and they're worst of all. I say, Master Nat, stop and see that the pot don't boil over. I want to go down and get some fresh, clean water."

"Don't be long, then," I cried. "I say, what's in the pot?"

"Dicky bird stoo!" said Pete, grinning. "No touching while I'm gone."

He caught up the bucket and started off down the cliff-side towards the river, while I idly watched him till he was out of sight, and sat back away from the glow of the fire, for I was hot enough without that.

Then I naturally began thinking about the splendid trogons, and whether there was any likely place near that we had not well hunted through.

"Lots," I said to myself. "They're here to-day and gone to-morrow. That's the way with birds, except when they have nests. They go about according to where they can find food. Hullo! He can't have got to the water in this short time."

For I had caught sight of Pete hurrying back, and as soon as he saw me watching him climbing up from below he begun to make signs to me not to speak.

"What has he found?" I said to myself, for he was creeping up nearly bent double and moving with the greatest caution.

I rose to go down to him, but at the slightest movement he waved his hand to me to keep back; so I waited till he came up, panting, his face covered with the great drops of perspiration.

"Seen a big snake?" I said, laughing.

"No," he whispered; "don't make a noise. I've seen the troghums."

"What!" I cried excitedly.

"Don't," he whispered, "or you may frighten 'em again."

"But do you mean to say you've seen some of the beautiful trogons?"

"No," he panted, "not them; I've seen two or three of them other birds with the green and yellow and blue cocked-up tails, same as I saw before and you couldn't find."

"Where are they?" I cried eagerly, for it was evident that he had seen something new in the way of birds.

"Down below in the path we cut away to get to the water. They're behind the low bushes, three or four of 'em, and I could see their tails cocking up over the top. Guns, quick, 'fore they're gone and you say I was dreaming again."

I uttered a low chirruping signal which brought my uncle and Cross to hear the news, and the next minute we had seized our guns.

None too soon, for we were hardly ready before Pete pointed triumphantly downward towards a clump of ferns some twenty yards away, where I distinctly saw something move.

"Now, aren't there no birds with tails like that?" he whispered, and I saw plainly in three places just such feathers as he had described rise into sight; but they were not the tails of birds, being the fantastic feather tiaras of Indians, whose dark faces rose now full in our view.

The next moment we saw that they were armed with bows, and I had hardly realised this when there was a twanging sound, the whizz of arrows, and I uttered a cry of pain.

It was as if a red-hot iron had passed through my shoulder, and my cry was echoed by an Indian yell.

Chapter Twelve.

Attacked by Indians.

My pang of agony was accompanied by a feeling of rage against the cause of it, and in blind fury I fired both barrels of my gun in the direction of the Indians, almost at the same moment as my uncle and the carpenter discharged theirs.

The reports were followed by another yell, the crashing of bushes and ferns, and the sound as of men tearing away.

"Take care, Cross," cried my uncle. "Load again, and keep under cover. Hah! there goes one of the treacherous hounds. Gone, and I'm not loaded. Now I am. Not hurt, are you, Nat?"

"I'm afraid I am," I said, drawing in my breath with pain.

"Here, let's look," cried my uncle. "Keep under cover, Pete. I don't want anyone else to be hurt. You, Cross, look out, and fire at the first sign. Now, Nat, what is it? Tut, tut, tut! There, keep a good heart, my lad. It has gone clean through your shoulder."

"Poisoned, uncle?" I cried anxiously.

"Pooh! Nonsense, boy! Hold still. It will not be a long operation."

I saw him take out his keen knife.

"Are you going to cut out the arrow head?" I said huskily.

"There is no need; the Indian did that for you. Look here."

I could not help shuddering, but I was firm, and watched him take hold of the slender arrow close to my shoulder, and with one stroke cut cleanly through it close to the wing-feathers. Then, going behind me, he seized the other part and made me wince once more with pain, as with one quick, steady movement, he drew the missile right through.

"Hurt?" he said cheerfully.

"Horribly, uncle."

"Never mind that. It's only through flesh. No bone-touch, and there are only a couple of little holes to heal up. Pan of water here, Pete."

"Aren't none, sir. I was going to fetch a bucket when I see what I thought was birds."

"Tut, tut, tut!" ejaculated my uncle. "I must have some water to bathe the wounds."

"All right, sir; I'll run down for some. Bucket's down there."

"No, no! The Indians—they may attack you."

"What!" cried Pete in a whimpering voice; "touch me when I'm going for some water for Master Nat? They'd better! I'd smash 'em."

Before he could be stopped he was bounding down the precipitous place, and my uncle turned anxiously to Cross.

"See any sign of them?" he said.

"Yes, sir, twice over; but they were too quick for me to get a shot. They've waded the river down yonder, and I got a glimpse of two of 'em climbing up."

"Hah! Then he may escape them. Cross, one of us ought to follow and cover him."

"Right, sir. I'm off," cried the carpenter, and he hurried down our way to the river, just as we heard two sharp cracks from somewhere below.

"Make you feel sick, Nat?" said my uncle.

"No, I forgot it just then. I was thinking what a trump Pete is. Poor fellow! He has risked his life to get me that water."

"Yes," said my uncle through his teeth: "he's a brave fellow, and he likes you, Nat."

No more was said, and in a few minutes we heard the rustling of bushes and saw Bill Cross coming backwards with his gun at the ready, covering Pete, who was panting up with his bucket of water.

The next minute my smarting wounds were being bathed and the bleeding encouraged till it stopped naturally, when my uncle brought out his pocket-book, applied some lint from it, and bandaged the places firmly, afterwards turning a handkerchief into a sling.

"There," he said, "you need not fidget about poison, my lad. The place will soon heal. Now then, any sign of the enemy?"

"No, sir," cried Pete; "they cut away across the river, all but that chap that was hit."

"Was one hit?" said my uncle eagerly.

"Yes, sir; he's lying down yonder by the water, and he's got our chopper."

"What?"

"I come upon him lying bleeding, and as soon as he saw me he began to put an arrow on his bow-string; but I hit him on the nose, broke his bow in two, and chucked his arrows in the river. He must have come before, and sneaked our old axe."

"Then he's there now?"

"Yes, sir; he can't run. You winged him—I mean legged. But I've got our chopper again."

"Sit still, Nat," said my uncle. "Here, Pete, carry my gun, and you, Cross, come and cover me. I can't leave the poor wretch like that."

I saw Cross frown as he followed my uncle, and Pete stopped for a moment behind with me.

"I mustn't stop, Master Nat," he said. "I am sorry, sir, but don't you be a downhearted 'un. I shan't be long. I say: who was right about the axe?"

I nodded my thanks to him, and then sat back, in acute pain, thinking about the sudden change in the state of our affairs, and of how necessary it would be for us to retreat into a safer part of the country. It was all so unexpected and so vexatious, just as in all probability we might be on the point of discovering the birds we sought.

I was musing in a half-faint way, the pain and shock having made me feel very sick, when I heard the sounds of the returning party, and to my surprise they brought in the wounded Indian on Cross's back, the poor fellow being in a half-fainting condition from a frightful wound in the right thigh.

As he was laid down on his back he began to come-to, and looked wildly round, while when he saw my uncle approach him knife in hand, he set his teeth and made a fierce attempt to rise.

But Cross was holding him from behind, and the poor fellow was helpless. He evidently believed that his enemy was about to put him to death, and on finding that he could not help himself he seemed ready to calmly accept his fate, for he fixed his eyes upon my uncle with a bitter, contemptuous smile, and then folded his arms and lay there like an image cast in bronze.

It was not a fierce countenance, being smooth, large-eyed, and disposed to be effeminate and plump, while when my uncle busied himself over the terrible wound with the knife, and must have given the man excruciating pain, he did not even wince, but kept gazing hard at his surgeon who tortured him, as if proud and defiant to the last.

His expression only began to change when he saw the knife laid aside and Pete bring some water in the tin for my uncle to bathe the wound; and now it was full of wonder as the place was covered with lint from the pocket-book, and then carefully bandaged from the supply ready against accidents.

"There, my fine fellow," said my uncle at last; "now if you keep quiet, you being a healthy fellow, young and strong, that bad wound will soon heal. If you had left us alone you would not have got it. You don't understand, of course; but you must lie still."

The Indian's countenance changed more than ever. He had fully grasped the fact that he was not to be slain, and also that his wound had been carefully dressed, and with his fierce aspect completely gone, he took hold of the hand with which my uncle was pressing him back to lie still, and held it against his forehead, smiling up at him the while; and then he sank back and closed his eyes.

"It's a bad wound, Nat, but he'll get over it. That must have been your shot."

"Why not yours?" I said. "I couldn't shoot with that arrow through me."

"But you did, for it was done with the big swan pellets, and I had nothing but dust shot in my gun, for the little birds."

"Oh!" I cried wonderingly.

"Ah, that's why you made that poor fellow cry."

As I lay and thought afterwards I was to my dissatisfaction convinced that mine had been the hand which fired the shot, and the knowledge of this somehow made me feel a kind of sympathy for the savage who lay there far more badly wounded than I, while the carpenter and my uncle, with Pete's help, built up a kind of semi-circular hedge as a defence around us.

"We can't begin our retreat with you in that condition, Nat," my uncle said, "and I don't like to be driven away by a little party of ruffians like these."

"I could walk," I said.

"I know that," he replied curtly; "walk yourself into a state, of fever, and make your wound go bad. Look at that fellow; Nature teaches him what to do—lie still—curl up like an animal, till his injury heals. What are you thinking about?"

"That poor fellow's wound."

"Poor fellow! Possibly the savage who sent that arrow through your shoulder. You're a rum fellow, Nat."

"Well, you were just as sympathetic, uncle," I said. "See how you dressed his wound, just as if he were a friend."

"No, I did not, Nat," he said, smiling. "I dressed him just as a surgeon should a wounded patient. By the way, he did not seem to bear any malice."

"Perhaps he will, uncle, when he knows I shot him."

"Don't tell him, then. We'll all share the blame."

"So you mean to stop here, then?" I said.

"Yes, certainly, for the present. Why, if we were to begin to pack up, I daresay the next thing we should see would be a flock of quetzals flying about."

"But suppose a whole tribe of Indians attack us?"

"Not likely, Nat. These people are few and greatly scattered; but if we are attacked we shall have to give the poor wretches a scaring with a few charges of shot—I mean distant charges, scattered, not fired at close quarters like yours."

The day passed slowly by, with my three companions working away to strengthen our little camp, and the wounded Indian sleeping. I, too, dropped off for an hour during the great heat of the late afternoon, and awoke feeling feverish and strange. But Pete was set to bathe my forehead with water, and the rapid evaporation made my head comparatively cool and pleasant, so much so that my uncle smiled.

"You're going on all right, Nat," he said, "and the wound will soon grow easier."

The sun had passed over to the west, and was behind the cliff, leaving us well in shelter; the sound of the rushing water below sounded cool and pleasant, and I was lying back watching the wounded Indian—Carib, my uncle called him—when all at once there came a low howl from the thicket on the other side of the river.

"What's that! One of the howling monkeys?" I said to uncle.

"No," he said softly, and I saw him reach out his hand slowly for his gun. "Watch my patient."

I turned my eyes to where the man lay, and saw that he had raised his head, and was gazing keenly in the direction whence the cry had come.

The next minute the howl was repeated, and it had hardly died out when it arose again, but this time from our prisoner, who placed his hands to his lips and sent forth a mournful cry.

Then it was answered from the other side, and the Carib turned excitedly to us, talking rapidly, but without our being able to comprehend a word.

One thing, though, was evident—the poor fellow was highly excited, and he smiled and chattered at us, before repeating the cry, which was again answered, and then a kind of duet was kept up, with the distance and time between the calls growing shorter minute by minute.

"This is all very well," said Cross softly, "but he's bringing on his Injun mates. You'll tell us when to fire, sir?"

"Yes, if there is any need," said my uncle. "Be ready; that is all."

Our prisoner watched us excitedly, and evidently grasped what was meant, for he began to talk to us eagerly, and then pointed downward again and again.

He was in the midst of an eager explanation to us when there was a rustling in the bushes below, and a dusky figure came up, caught sight of us behind the barricade, and stopped short. But our prisoner uttered a call, and the dark, pleasant-faced figure came on fearlessly, found the opening we had left, and the next moment was down upon her knees wailing softly and passing her hands over the bandages, ending by laying her face against our prisoner's breast, and beginning to sob.

"Nothing to fear from her," said my uncle. "It's the poor fellow's wife."

Meanwhile the Carib was evidently explaining his position to the woman, and she turned to us, smiling, evidently ready to be the best of friends, while her manners showed that she meant to stay and nurse her wounded husband, whom she had traced to where he lay.

"Better be friends than enemies, Nat," said my uncle. "But one of us must keep watch to-night."

Chapter Thirteen.

Success at Last.

Watch was kept that night and several more, while the days were passed suspiciously and uneasily. But we saw no sign of more Indians, those who shared our camp seeming quite at home, and proving to be gentle, inoffensive creatures, now that they were satisfied that we intended to do them no harm.

The woman began at once to see to the fire, and fetch water from the river, and only once showed any sign of resentment. That was on the morning following her coming, when my uncle began to unfasten his patient's bandages after dressing my arm.

This she tried to stop by seizing my uncle's hand, but at a word from her husband she sat down and watched the whole process. After that the morning performance of the surgical duties was looked for with the greatest interest, the woman fetching water and waiting upon my uncle during his attention to both his patients.

The days passed on, with my wound troubling me but very little. The prisoner's was far worse, but he did not seem to suffer, settling down quite happily in a dreamy way, and as no danger came near, the shooting and collecting went on, my uncle going alone, and leaving Pete and Cross to protect me and the camp.

Fortunately we had a sufficiency of stores, my uncle shot for provisions as well as science; I helped by sitting down in one particular spot by the rushing stream and catching fish almost as fast as I could throw in, and Mapah, as the woman's name seemed to be, went off every morning and returned loaded with wild fruit and certain roots, which she and her husband ate eagerly.

Some very good specimens were brought in by my uncle, and the two Indians sat watching us curiously as we busily skinned them, filled them out, and laid them to dry, Mapah eagerly taking possession of the tail-feathers of some parrots intended

to be cooked for the evening's meal, and weaving them into a band of plaited grass so as to form tiaras of the bright-hued plumes for herself and her husband, both wearing them with no little show of pride.

"And only to think of it, Master Nat," said Pete. "Reg'larly cheated me when I see 'em first over the bushes; I made sure they was birds."

They expressed a good deal of pleasure, too, over some of the brighter birds brought in, and our prisoner talked and made signs to me and pointed in one direction as he tried hard to make me understand something one day; but I was alone with him, and very dense for a time, as in a crippled way I put the finishing touches to the skin of a brilliant kingfisher.

Then all at once I grasped his meaning.

"Why, of course!" I cried. "How thick-headed of me!"

I went to the bamboo half-box, half-basket Cross had made, and brought it back to where the Indian was sitting nursing his wounded leg, took off the lid, and carefully withdrew the trogon.

"Is that the sort of bird you mean?" I said.

"Hah!" he said, in a long-drawn cry, full of the satisfaction he felt, and both he and his wife chattered to me eagerly, Mapah shaking her head, though, and pointing at the bird's tail with one dusky hand, before holding both out before me a yard apart.

"You've seen them with tails as long as that?" I said, placing my hand by the caudal feathers of our one specimen, and then slowly drawing it away till it was some distance off.

"Hah!" cried the Indian again, and he laughed and chatted, and pointed across the river to the south, while his wife took off her feather crown, held it before me, and drew each long feather through her hand as if stretching it to three feet in length, and then touched the golden-green plumage of our solitary specimen.

The trogon was carefully put away, the kingfisher laid to dry, and then I could hardly contain myself till my uncle's return, well laden with ducks and a dusky bird that was evidently a half-grown turkey.

"Tired out, Nat," he said, throwing down the birds, for Mapah and her husband to seize and begin to pluck for our evening meal. "We must make a fresh start."

"Why?" I said quietly.

"Because we have shot the only trogon in the district, and we are wasting time here."

"Nonsense," I said; "there are plenty more."

"If we could find them," he replied wearily.

I had intended to keep him waiting longer, but I could not hold back what I felt certain I had discovered, and hurrying to the case I brought out the precious specimen and made Mapah and her husband go through the whole pantomime again.

"Why, Nat," cried my uncle excitedly, while Pete and Cross looked on, "it's as plain as a pikestaff: these people are quite familiar with the long-tailed species—*resplendens*—and they could take us to places where they could be found."

"That's it, uncle," I cried, and Pete and Cross joined in a hearty cheer.

"Oh, but to think of it—the misery and disappointment," cried my uncle: "that poor fellow will not be able to walk and act as guide for a month, and it may be a hundred miles away."

"That don't matter, sir," cried Pete; "he's only a little chap. Me and Bill Cross'll take it in turns pig-a-backing him; won't we mate?"

"We will that, Pete, lad," cried the carpenter, and somehow that seemed to be the brightest evening of our expedition, even the two Indians seeming to share our satisfaction, for they readily grasped the idea that they had afforded us pleasure by promising in their fashion to show us the objects of our weary search.

As we lay down to sleep that night I felt more wakeful than ever I had been before, and I could hear my uncle turning restlessly about.

All at once he broke the silence by whispering,—

"Asleep, Nat?"

"Asleep? No; I've got quetzal on the brain, and the birds seem to be pecking at my shoulder on both sides with red-hot beaks. How do you feel?"

"In agony, my boy. I'm afraid we have been jumping at conclusions. Perhaps the Indians do not understand, after all."

Sleep came at last, though, and the next day nothing else could be thought of or talked of. The Indians were questioned in dumb show, with the skin of the trogon for a text, and we got on more, Uncle Dick's spirits rising as it grew more plainly that the Indian fully understood about the birds we wanted. In fact, in dumb show he at last began to teach us the bird's habits.

He showed us how it sat upon the branch of a tree, taking a parroquet as an example, pointing out that the bird we meant had toes like it, two before and two behind, setting it on a piece of wood, and then ruffling its plumage all up till it looked like a ball of feathers.

"That's right, Nat," cried my uncle. "Exactly how trogons sit. The fellow's a born observer. I am glad you shot him. Go on, Dusky."

The man understood, as he sat holding the piece of branch in one hand, the bird in the other. He glanced at us to see if we were watching him, and then smoothing the feathers quickly, he began to buzz and whirr like a beetle, as cleverly as a ventriloquist. Next he made the dead bird he held dart from its perch, and imitated the quick flight of one chasing a large beetle through the air, catching it, and returning to its perch, where with wonderful accuracy he went through the movements of it swallowing its prey, and then ruffling itself up again into a ball of feathers.

"Splendid!" cried my uncle. "Exact. He knows the right birds, Nat. Now then, Cuvier, where is the happy spot? Over yonder?" and my uncle pointed up the river; but the Indian shook his head, and pointed across and away to the south, after which he laid his head upon his hand and imitated going to sleep eight times.

"Eight days' journey to the south, Nat," said Uncle Dick. "A long way to carry him. I understand," he said, turning to the Indian again, shouldering his gun, bending down, and making believe to walk; but his patient shook his head violently, took hold of his piece of wood, and went through the motion of paddling.

"Hah!" I cried, imitating him. "He means we should have to go in a canoe, uncle."

"That's it," he cried, and he pointed down at the river; but the man shook his head again, and pointed right across into the distance.

"Nat," said my uncle, "we shall do it yet. It must be on that river we passed before we turned up this. We shall have to get him down to the boat."

I wish I could write—*No sooner said than done*; but it was not so; for our future guide was not yet fit to start on such a journey. He was getting better fast, but not fast enough, and in spite of my assertions, I was not recovered from a very bad wound. In short, it seemed that the only thing to do, as we appeared to have nothing more to fear from Indians with two such guards in camp, was to send down to the boat for more of the stores, that is, enough for another fortnight's stay, when the difficulty was solved by Cross one morning.

"I've been turning it over in my mind, Master Nat, about carrying that chap down to the boat, but the doctor says it would open his wound again and throw him back, so that won't do."

"No; certainly not," I said.

"Then I got a notion that I could knock up a sort of chair he could sit in, and me and Pete and Mrs Mapah could carry it strapped on our backs in turn."

"Nonsense! That little woman could not carry her husband."

"What, sir!" cried Cross laughing. "Don't you make a mistake, sir; she's as strong as a pony. But the doctor says it would shake him too much, so what do you say to this? S'pose I build a raft, and we go back the same as we come?"

"Through the dark cavern?"

"I don't know no laws again' our burning a good light, sir."

"But how are you going to get it down the falls?"

"In bits, sir," he said, laughing. "I should build it down yonder on the side at the bottom of the falls. Then we could swing old

Dusky down with the rope, and all we should want would be a couple of bamboo poles, and there we are."

The notion seemed wild at first, but Cross soon showed Uncle Dick and me that it was quite possible; and in the course of the next fortnight he proved it by means of his axe, making the raft out of the bamboos that he cut and which we sent down to him over the falls, some to be broken in the descent, but the most part to reach him safe and sound.

As the work went on Mapah helped, being wonderfully active and sure-footed on the rocks; and through her our prisoner grasped the meaning of what was going on, nodding and smiling when the time came for our start, and to my great satisfaction showing not the slightest shrinking from venturing into the cavern after being carefully lowered down.

For at last all was ready, and with a good supply of resinous boughs cut into lengths for torches, we lit up and embarked upon our return journey, to find that what had looked so terrible through the darkness of ignorance was a perfectly trivial affair. It was through resounding cavern and winding tunnel, shrouded in gloom, but utterly wanting in terrors and difficulties, being merely the gliding down a subterranean stream out into broad daylight at the other end.

Here our raft served to carry us over the shallows right down to our boat, at which our prisoner gazed in wonder—wonder which was increased when we set sail and glided towards the mouth of the little river we had passed on our way up.

It soon became evident that in his wanderings our Indian had been over the ground before. This was proved by his manner towards his wife, to whom he talked eagerly, pointing out different objects, rocky cliff, forest and mountain, as if they were familiar objects.

But the great proof of all was his behaviour a couple of days later, when we felt that the mouth of the southern river must be near, for he was all excitement till it was in sight, when he began shouting to us and pointing, indicating that we should steer the boat into the mouth of the very river as I suggested weeks before, and take a fresh course.

"Hah!" exclaimed my uncle; "you were right, Nat, after all. I fancied he meant this."

Fortunately for us, the narrowness and the way in which the side stream was encumbered with overhanging growth, fallen log and tangle proved to be only at the very beginning; for at the end of a mile or two of difficulties which were very discouraging, while the stream narrowed so that it promised to close in overhead, its course became clearer and its waters deep and sluggish, so that we were able to camp at night some miles from the mouth.

The next day our guide showed us by signs that our oars were not proper implements for use in such a river, with the result that Cross set to work roughing out a paddle which our companions seized upon to finish off while another was made. Boards from the bottom and thwarts were cut up for the purpose, and before many hours had passed we were furnished with half-a-dozen fairly useful paddles, by whose aid, and all working together, the boat could be directed through the narrowest channels of verdure.

For the next six days we steadily advanced, through a wonderfully beautiful region, a very paradise for a naturalist, and where we might have collected gorgeously plumaged birds by the thousand and insects galore.

But we had our one aim in view, and though we seemed as far off as ever, and there were moments when Uncle Dick and I began to doubt, our guide seemed so confident, pointing always onward, that we grew hopeful again, and went on and on.

"Do you know what Bill Cross says, Master Nat?" said Pete, when we were camping one evening.

"How should I?" I replied pettishly, for I was weary of the continuous paddling.

"Then, I'll tell you, sir," said Pete solemnly, "He says he feels cock-sure that them two brown 'uns is taking us to where their tribe lives, so that they may grab the boat and guns and things, and then light a fire and have a feast."

"Eat us?" I said.

"That's it, sir; the doctor says they must be Caribs, and Caribs is cannibals, and we ought to go back."

"So we will, Pete," I said, "when we have found the quetzals."

It was the very next day that, after struggling a few more miles over shallows, the roar of water fell upon our ears, and the current gradually grew more swift, while that night with a good deal of pantomime our guide indicated that the boat could go no farther.

"As if we didn't know that, Master Nat," said Cross.

The consequence was that our craft was securely moored, the tent once more set up on shore, and after a good night's rest we started off to explore the open wooded country around the beautiful falls close at hand.

We left Cross in camp with the Indian, and his wife eagerly started with us as guide, leading us through lovely patches of forest and open glade till we were well above the falls, and where the little stream now glided slowly along.

"It looks as if we're to find the quetzal at last," said my uncle softly; "the woman seems so confident."

"I hope so," I said; "for if ever there was a beautiful home for a bird it ought to be here."

We had hardly spoken before Mapah, who was some distance ahead, stopped, held up her hand, and stole back, signing for us to take her place and go forward.

We cocked our guns and stepped cautiously on, to find ourselves at the edge of an opening where no less than five of the lovely birds we sought were perched, each on a dead bough, with plumage absolutely glittering in the sun-rays, which shot through, just as the flashing scale of the humming-bird sends forth its gleams of broken light.

Every now and then one darted out into the full sunshine in chase of butterfly or beetle, its loose tail-feathers spreading out comet-like and waving in the clear air.

The scene was so striking that for some time we stood bending forward watching the birds and their actions, every movement showing their glorious plumage in a fresh light, and but one feeling was upon us—that it was like sacrilege to destroy creatures so exquisitely perfect. At last, though, the naturalist and collector prevailed. We had come thousands of miles to secure specimens of these birds for English museums, and have them we must.

I started as from a dream on seeing my uncle move.

"Going to fire, uncle?" I said.

"Yes, Nat," he replied, with something like a sigh; "we must have a few to take back."

He raised his gun, but lowered it again, and looked at me, while I looked at him.

"Was it all a dream?" he said hoarsely.

"Surely not, uncle," I cried, as I stared about the opening, where not a bird was to be seen.

But we had proof directly that it was no dream, for Pete, who was holding the spare guns, cried excitedly:

"Oh, I say! You've let 'em go!"

In the days which followed we were less sentimental, getting, in the neighbourhood of where we had seen them first, specimen after specimen in the most perfect plumage, till we felt that it would be like a crime to shoot down more.

"Let's get away from the temptation, Nat," said my uncle, and the very next day we started back, intent now on the one thought of getting our treasures safely home.

We parted from our Indian companions a fortnight later, sending them ashore with our guide's wound so nearly cured that he could limp about easily. They were laden with presents—Uncle Dick's patient proud of the grandest prize he evidently thought a man could possess, to wit, the carpenter's axe; and his wife rejoicing in a leather housewife of needles and thread, a pair of good useful scissors, and my old silver watch, hung by its chain round her tawny neck—her great joy being in a child-like way to hold it to her ear after winding up to listen to its ticking.

Bill Cross made a set of new cases when he reached Port Royal for the careful packing of the skins in our glorious collection, and he and Pete parted from us with every sign of regret.

"I thought my tools might come in useful, gentlemen," he said, smiling.

"I don't know what we should have done without you, Cross," said my uncle.

Pete's forehead wrinkled up, and he looked at me wistfully.

"I don't know which was the more useful, Cross," I said, "you or Pete."

"Wish you a safe journey home to the old country, gentlemen," said Pete, smiling; "and, if ever you're going collecting again and'll take me, why, I'd come from anywheres the wide world round."

But they did not say good-bye when the vessel in which we had taken our passage sailed, for the captain was short of hands and gladly took them on, so that it was at Liverpool we finally parted, for we had what they wished us, a safe journey home.

"You will take me if you go again, Master Nat?" cried Pete, when we shook hands.

"Yes, Pete," I said; "I promise you I will."

The End.
